

THE AMETHYST
CROSS

FERGUS HUME





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By

FERGUS HUME

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the Web," "The Purple Fern," "The Mystery
of the Shadow," etc.*



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The Amethyst Cross

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF A MYSTERY

THE blackbird knew. He had mated for the fifth time in as many years, and esteemed himself wise in the matters of love. Therefore, from the budding chestnut wherein his nest was built, did he sympathetically watch the bachelor and maid who sat below. They were lovers as he knew very well, for only lovers could have gazed so persistently into one another's eyes, and therein did they behold each other as each wished to be. Which sentence is cryptic to those who are not lovers as these were.

They might have looked at the smoothly-flowing river, singing quietly to itself not a stone-cast away, or round a tangled garden, delicately beautiful with the young greenery of May, or into the azure depths of a sky flecked with silvery clouds. But they preferred—wisely it may be—to look into each other's eyes, to clasp hands and to remain silent with that eloquent muteness, which is the speech of true love. Oh! the blackbird knew the meaning of these things very thoroughly, and chuckled with such glee that he finally broke into glorious song concerning the new love, the true love, the old love, the bold love, which comes evermore with the blossoms of spring. But these inhabitants of Paradise did not require the bird to reveal the obvious. Their hearts were 'also singing the song of the early year.

"It can't last for ever," murmured the maid dreamily, "it is too beautiful to last, since we are but mortal."

"It shall last for ever; it must," corrected the bachelor, wise in that wisdom of the gods which comes

to wooers, "for we love with our souls, dearest, and these cannot die."

She knew that he was right, for her heart told her so. Therefore did they again look into one another's eyes and again become silent, while the fluting blackbird explained more than mere human speech could render. And he, perched on a swaying bough, was only too willing to interpret. He knew: he was wise. And listening Nature heard complacently. To such ends had she shaped her children; for such a reason had she provided their Arcadia.

As Arcadia, like Marlowe's hell, is not circumscribed, it chanced that this especial one was by Thames-side, and those who dwelt therein were up-to-date in looks and dress and manners. Only their feelings were those of classic times, and as he told her the old, old story, which is ever new, she listened with the instinctive knowledge that the tale was wonderfully familiar. She had read it in his eyes, after the manner of maids, long before he dared to speak.

And this river Paradise was not wholly unworthy of so comely an Adam and Eve, although limited in extent and untrimmed in looks. Lord Beaconsfield declared that the most perfect garden is that cultivated to excess by man and then handed over to the caprice of Nature. The owner of this demesne apparently subscribed to this dictum, for the garden, well filled with expensive flowers and shrubs, had long since relapsed into wildness. On either side of the narrow strip of land, sloping gradually to the stream, extended low walls of mellow red brick overgrown with dark-green ivy. The flower beds were luxuriant with docks and nettles and charlock and divers weeds: the pathways were untidy with lush grass, and the tiny lawn at the water's edge was shaggy and untrimmed. A wooden landing-stage floated near shore at the garden's foot and to this was attached the young man's boat. At the far end of this neglected domain could be seen a thatched cottage with whitewashed walls and oblong lattices quaintly diamond-paned. So rustic and pretty and old-world did it look that it might well have been the fairy dwelling of a nursery tale. And the lovers themselves were young and handsome enough to deserve the care of the fairies.

He was tall, slim, well-formed and Saxon in his fairness. His curly hair—so much of it as the barber's shears had spared—was golden in the sunlight, as was his small moustache, and his eyes were bravely blue as a hero's should be. The white boating-flannels accentuated the bronze of his skin, and revealed the easy strength of an athlete. He looked what the girl took him to be—a splendid young lover of romance. Yet he was but a City clerk of prosaic environment, and his youth alone improved him into Don Juan o' Dreams.

The girl resembled Hebe, maidenly, dainty, and infinitely charming; or it might be Titania, since her appearance was almost too fragile for the workaday world. With a milky skin; brown-haired and brown-eyed; with a tempting mouth and a well-rounded chin, she looked worthy of any man's wooing. She was sweet and twenty; he but five years older, so both were ripe for love. And then the spring, joyous and fresh, had much to do with the proposal just made. Her answer to his question had been tunefully commented upon by the irrepressible blackbird, who expressed no surprise when the echo of a kiss interrupted his song.

"But my father will never agree, George," sighed the girl, after this outward and visible sign of acceptance.

"Dearest Lesbia"—he folded her manfully in his arms—"I don't see why your father should object. I am not rich certainly, as a stockbroker's clerk doesn't earn large wages. But for your dear sake I shall work and work and work until I become a millionaire."

Lesbia smiled at this large promise. "We may have to wait for years."

"What does it matter so long as our hearts are true?"

"They may grow sick with waiting," said Lesbia, sighing. Then she proceeded to look on the practical side of their idyll, as the most romantic of women will do at the most romantic of moments. "You earn only two hundred a year, darling, and my father—so far as I know—can give me nothing. He has his pension from Lord Charvington, and makes a small income by his work in the City, but——" here came a depressing pause.

"What does Mr. Hale do in the City?" asked George abruptly.

Lesbia opened her brown eyes. "I don't know, dear. He goes there two or three times a week and always seems to be busy. I have asked him what his occupation is, but he only laughs, and declares that dry business details would not interest me. I am sure no girl ever knew so little of her father as I do. It's not fair."

"Strange!" murmured the young man meditatively. "I never see Mr. Hale in the City, and although I have asked several people, no one appears to know the name. Of course, darling, the City is a big place, and your father may do business in a quiet way. Still it is odd that no one should know. I wish I did. I might help him."

"In what way?"

"Well, Lesbia, the wages I receive at Tait's office are small, and—and—and"—here George flushed for no apparent reason—"and there are other things to be considered. If I could only get something else to do I should leave Tait's. Your father might be willing to let me enter his office, you know, and then I could work up his business, whatever it might be."

The girl nodded. She was a matter-of-fact young woman. Since Hale's income was limited she was compelled, as housekeeper, very often to consider ways and means. "You might speak to my father."

"And may I mention our engagement?" he supplemented.

"No-o!" Lesbia looked doubtful. "I had better announce that. Father has a temper, and if he grew angry, you might grow angry also."

"Oh no." George was entirely in earnest when he said this. "I should always remember that he was your father, and that you love him."

Lesbia again looked doubtful. "Do I love him?" she mused.

"One is supposed to love one's father," suggested George.

She stared at the river. "Yes! I suppose so. Honour your parents, and so forth. I don't honour my father, though—his temper is too bad. I am not quite sure if I love him."

"Oh, my dear!" George looked nervous.

"Don't make any mistake, dear boy. I like my father since we are good friends, and usually he is kind—that is, when he is not in a rage. But then, you see, sweetest," she sighed, "he is nearly always in a rage about some trifle. Look at the garden," she waved her hand vaguely, "I wanted to hire a gardener to make it look more respectable, and father was furious. He declared that he did not want people to come spying round the cottage. Spying! Such an odd word to use."

"Your father is an odd man," said George ruefully, "and he certainly has not been over-hospitable to me. Perhaps he guesses that I have come to steal his jewel, and one can't be hospitable to a robber."

Lesbia pinched his chin. "You silly boy, my father doesn't think so much of me as you do. I sometimes wonder," she went on sadly, "if he loves me at all. I am very much alone."

"He doesn't treat you badly?" demanded George with a sudden heat.

"No, dear, no. I shouldn't allow anyone to treat me badly, not even my father. But I fancy he regards me as a necessary trouble, for sometimes he looks at me in a disagreeable way as though he fancied I was spying."

"Why do you use so disagreeable a word?" asked the straightforward clerk.

"My father used it himself in the first instance," she rejoined promptly; "perhaps because he doesn't want anyone else to meet the queer people who come to see him—generally after dark—men who smell of drink, who use slang and dress like grooms,—certainly not gentlemen. Of course I never talk to them, for when they appear, my father always sends me to my room. I'm sure," sighed the girl dolefully, "that if it wasn't for old Tim, the servant, I should be quite alone."

George hugged her. "You shall never be alone again!" he whispered, and Lesbia threw her arms round his neck with great contentment.

"Oh, darling, you don't know how good that sounds to me. If it were only true. You see, my father may object."

"He can object until he is tired," cried the ardent lover. "If he does not make you happy, I must. And when he sees this——"

"Oh!" Lesbia clasped her hands in delight at the sight of a cheap turquoise ring, "how lovely!"

George frowned at the mean gift. "It was all I could afford," said he.

"It is all I want," she said, as he slipped it on her engagement finger. "It's not the cost, or even the thing. It's what it means. Love and joy to you and me, dearest boy."

But George, having a generous heart, still lamented. "If I hadn't to keep my mother," he said ruefully, "I would save up and give you diamonds. But two hundred a year goes a very little way with my mother, even when her own small income is added. You see, dear, she never forgets that my father was the Honourable Aylmer Walker, and she will insist upon having everything of the best. This is a beastly cheap ring, but——"

"But you denied yourself all manner of nice things to buy it for ME," finished Lesbia, pressing a kiss on his willing cheek.

"No, dear, no," he said valiantly, "only a few pipes of tobacco."

"You dearest donkey," cooed the girl, more touched than she chose to confess, "doesn't that show me how you love me? As to the ring," she surveyed the cheap trinket critically, "it is exactly what I wanted. The stones are the colour of your dear eyes."

George, man-like, was delighted. "You know the colour of my eyes?"

Lesbia boxed his ears delicately. "I knew the colour exactly one minute after our very first meeting."

"Did you love me then?"

"No; certainly not. How conceited you are!"

"Then why did you notice my——"

"Oh, a woman always notices these things, when a man is nice."

"And you thought me nice?"

Lesbia fenced. "Good-looking, at all events. You wore a dark flannel suit striped with pale green."

"So I did," cried George, delighted. "It was at Mrs.

Riordan's picnic near Bisham Abbey a year ago. And you were there.

Lesbia laughed and nursed her knees. "I must have been, since I can describe you so exactly. What did I wear, dear?"

"I don't know," said George promptly.

"Oh!"—she was quite disappointed—"and you call yourself a lover?"

"I do," he rejoined stoutly, "for, as I fell in love with you the moment we met, I saw only your eyes and your angel face. How could you expect me to remember a mere dress when——"

"Oh, what nonsense!—very nice nonsense; still, nonsense."

"I like talking nonsense to you."

"And I like to hear it from you. But it isn't bread and butter."

"You're thinking of afternoon tea," said George Walker audaciously.

"No. I'm thinking of how we are to live when we marry."

The mere mention of that delicious word made George forget the warning conveyed by the sentence. "Marry! Marry you! Oh, heaven!"

"A pauper heaven, I fear," said Lesbia; then fished in her pocket. "See, the only valuable thing I possess besides your love. It is for you."

"Oh, my dear, it's not a man's ornament."

"As if that matters, since I give it to you," she said laughing. "I must give you something, and this is all I have to give."

She held out her hand, on the palm of which rested an amethyst cross formed of four deeply purple stones set lightly in gold filigree, with a loop at the top for the necessary chain to pass through. Not a very uncommon ornament at the first glance, George decided, although very beautiful. But on looking more closely he became aware that there was something bizarre about the thing. In the centre where the four stones met was a tiny cube of malachite, graven with a golden crown and inscribed with minute letters. The pansy-blossom hue of the stones contrasting with the vivid green of the cube gave the ornament rather an uncanny look.

"What a queer thing!" said George, transferring the cross to his broad palm.

"Yes! isn't it?" said Lesbia eagerly, and then brought out a magnifying glass. "And the inscription is still queerer."

George poised the powerful glass over the slab of malachite, and with some difficulty deciphered the golden Gothic letters, "'Refuse and Lose,'" he read slowly. "Now what does that mean?"

"You stupid darling," cried Lesbia, pinching his ear, "can't you see? If you refuse the cross—which is married life—you lose the crown—which is me."

Walker thrust the cross into his pocket, handed back the magnifying glass and solemnly embraced the girl. "I'll take the cross and the crown and you, and everything I can get," he whispered in her ear. "I don't exactly see the meaning, of course, but——"

"Was there ever such a dense man?" Lesbia demanded of the blackbird in despair. "It's a religious symbol, of course. If you refuse to bear life's cross in the way you should, you lose the crown which ought to be yours in heaven."

George took out the ornament again and looked at it seriously. He had a considerable strain of the Puritan in his nature, to which the idea appealed strongly. "I shall certainly not refuse life's cross," he declared soberly, "and may we both some day wear a crown in a better world."

"My darling, my dearest, my best," she murmured, embracing him fondly. The touch of seriousness in George's gay disposition enhanced his value in her eyes. She approved of so sterling a character.

"Where did you get the cross?" asked Walker, while the jewels winked in the sunshine. "From your father?"

"No!" she replied unexpectedly. "He doesn't know that I possess such a thing. But my nurse, old Bridget Burke—Tim's mother, you know—who died last summer, gave it to me on her death-bed and warned me not to tell my father about it. She said that it came from my dead mother, and was to be given by me to the man I loved. So you see, my darling, that even though it is a woman's ornament, you must take it."

"I'll wear it round my neck," declared George. "It will bring me good luck, I am sure."

"So Bridget said," observed the girl promptly. "She had the 'sight' you know, George, and declared that the cross would bring me luck and money and love and position. I don't know how, unless it is by marrying you."

"Ah, my love," said George somewhat sadly. "I can only give you my heart. Money and position must come later. But if we both obey the inscription and bear the cross we shall win the crown of success in the end. Look how the gems flash, Lesbia—an earnest of the future."

While they were both admiring the cross, a tall, lean man, perfectly dressed in a Bond Street kit, came softly down the grassy path. He looked like a gentleman, and also like a hawk, and his pale eyes wandered from one bent head to the other until they dropped to the flash of the jewelled cross which glittered on Walker's palm. Then the newcomer started nervously, and took a step nearer to observe. Lesbia and her lover looked up as the shadow of the man fell across them, and in the movement they made, the cross fell on the grass.

"Oh, father, how you startled us!" cried the girl, springing to her feet.

Mr. Walter Hale did not reply. His eyes were still on the purple stones of the cross, and when his daughter stooped to pick it up, he twitched his fingers as though anxious to take it from her. "Where did you get that?" he demanded abruptly and harshly.

"Bridget gave it to me, and I have given it to George," she said, handing the ornament to her lover. "It belonged to my mother."

"It did," said Hale sharply, "and therefore must not pass out of the family."

"It won't," said Lesbia cheerfully; "George is to be my husband."

Mr. Hale frowned. "You have yet to gain my permission," he said in dry tones. "Meanwhile, Mr. Walker, give me back the cross."

"No," said George who did not like the tone of his future father-in-law and could be obstinate when necessary. "Lesbia gave it to me, and I intend to keep it."

"Lesbia had no right to give it to you," cried Hale, his voice rising, and he extended his hand to take his desire. But Walker was too quick for him and, dexterously swerving, shot the cross into his pocket.

"It is Lesbia's first present to me," said he, excusing his obstinacy.

"She has no right to make you presents," foamed the other, who had now entirely lost his temper.

"She has the right of a lover," retorted George coolly.

"There can be no question of love between you and my daughter."

The girl moved to her lover's side, very pale and very defiant. "That is for me to decide," she said coldly, but with determination.

"You go against your father, Lesbia?"

"For the first time in my life. And why not, when the matter is so important?"

Hale bit his lips and tried to stare her down: but as her eyes did not drop before his own he was the first to give way, and did so with inward rage. With an impatient shrug he wheeled to face young Walker. The two presented the striking contrast of untainted youth and artificial age too much versed in the evils of life. And youth had the advantage, for—as in the case of Lesbia—the older man tried to dominate without success. He was forced to take refuge in idle threats.

"If you do not give me back that cross, it will be the worse for you," remarked Hale, very distinctly and with menace.

George clenched his fists, then, with a glance towards Lesbia, ended the argument by stepping into his boat. As he rowed off, Hale, who had not attempted to stop him, turned bitterly to his daughter.

"You have ruined me," he said between his teeth, and returned hastily to the cottage.

CHAPTER II

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

To say that Lesbia was amazed conveys imperfectly her state of mind. The sudden arrival of her father,

the hasty departure of her lover, the mysterious incident connected with the amethyst cross, and the still more mysterious remark which Mr. Hale had made—these things perplexed and, very naturally, alarmed her. At once, with the swiftness of an imaginative brain, she conjured up visions of disgrace and shame and criminal publicity, going too far in her surmises, after the fashion of such a brain. For after all, as a calmer reflection suggested, there was nothing in what had taken place that should induce such happenings, although there were several disquieting hints.

For a few moments the girl remained where she was, too agitated to move; but when Hale disappeared into the cottage, and George's boat vanished round a bend of the shining river, she woke to the fact that for her own peace of mind it was necessary to ask questions. At once she ran up the grass-grown path, and speedily found herself in the narrow passage which led right through the house from back to front. But she only entered to hear the street door bang, and flew to open it again in the hope of catching Mr. Hale before he could go far away. But the man must have made good use of his legs, for when she peered out into the quiet side street she noticed that it was empty. This vanishing of her father without an explanation dismayed her more than ever, and in the hope of gaining some sort of information she sought Tim in the tiny kitchen, calling on him loudly. A soft voice like a well-tuned lute answered her from the scullery.

"Ah, Miss Lesbia, and what wud ye be after spoilin' yer pretty voice for now? Don't ye, me darlin', don't ye!"

"Why has my father gone out, Tim?" asked Lesbia sharply.

An odd little man emerged from the scullery and stood coolly rubbing his nose-tip with the toe of the boot he was polishing. "An' how should I know, miss? Didn't he come tearing through the passage, as if the divil wor after him, an' lape like a trout int' the street? Sure ye must have seen the masther rampagin' yersilf."

"I know that father came and found me with George and——"

"Ah, thin, 'tis Garge, is it?" muttered Tim, beginning to brush mechanically.

"And rushed away in a temper because George would not give him my amethyst cross."

Crash went the boot on the floor, and the blacking-brush followed, while Tim stared out of his melancholy grey eyes as though he saw a ghost. Decidedly the ornament was causing a considerable sensation, although Lesbia could not understand why her father should rage, any more than why Tim should stare—"like a stuck pig," as she said inelegantly. And the annoying thing was that he did more than stare.

"Oh, blissid saints in glory!" groaned the Irishman, crossing himself.

"What on earth do you mean?" asked the girl, tartly, for she was beginning to weary of these mysteries.

"Oh, blissid saints in glory!" Tim moaned again, and, picking up the boot and the brush with the expression of a martyr, went into the scullery to peel potatoes.

Lesbia, who was a determined young woman, followed, quite bent upon getting at the root of the disturbance.

"Come and talk, Tim."

"Sure an' I must git the dinner ready anyhow, miss."

"Come out, or I'll come in," cried Lesbia, standing at the door.

"Sure, ye wudn't dirty th' clothes av ye," coaxed Tim, and very unwillingly scrambled back into the cleaner, drier kitchen with the tin basin of potatoes in his huge fist.

He was certainly an ugly, undersized man, and looked like the wicked dwarf of a fairy tale. But the similarity was all on the surface, for Tim Burke was as good and devoted a little Paddy as ever dipped his fingers in holy water. But his appearance was not prepossessing, for he was broader than he was long, and on a pair of hunched shoulders was set askew a gigantic head much too large for his squat body. His short legs were crooked, and he usually walked in a crab-like fashion in unexpected directions—that is, whither his brain did not direct his legs to go. He was barely five feet high, and his shaggy beard was as red as the untidy hair covering his poll. He was quite a monstrosity.

Nevertheless, Tim had his good points, for Nature had given him beautiful grey eyes, pathetic as those

of a dog, and a sweet sympathetic voice, which sounded like a mellow bell. To hear Tim sing Irish ditties of the heart-breaking sort was a treat not to be met with every day, but he rarely sang them, save to Lesbia, whom he adored. And small wonder, for she alone was kind to the odd, uncouth, little man. Mr. Hale, whose selfishness was phenomenal, treated Tim like a white slave; and indeed he might be called one, seeing that he worked like a horse and received no wages. Yet he was an admirable housekeeper and a magnificent cook. With such qualifications he could have procured a well-paid situation. Yet, for Lesbia's sake, he remained at Rose Cottage, watching her like a cat a mouse, but with more amiable intentions. She was the legacy which his mother Bridget, the girl's nurse, had left him on her death-bed, when she died some twelve months before.

Lesbia, looking like a fairy princess attended by her dwarf, perched herself on the kitchen table with a severe face. To lose no time while being questioned, Tim set to work peeling the potatoes, for Mr. Hale growled like a bear when his meals were not placed punctually on the table. As he peeled each potato, he dropped it with a splash into a bucket of clean water, and rarely raised his sad eyes to the face of his young mistress during the conversation which ensued. Also—and this Lesbia noticed—he conversed very reluctantly, and every admission was wrung from unwilling lips.

"Tim," said his mistress severely, and beginning at the beginning, "you are the only son of my nurse, Bridget Burke."

"I am that, miss, her only boy; and a good mother she was to me."

"A good nurse also, Tim. She loved me."

"An' who wudn't, ye pretty creature? Ain't I devoted to ye likewise, me darlin'? Answer me that now?"

"I shall do so," said Miss Hale significantly, "when our conversation comes to an end."

Tim groaned and winced. "Bad luck to the crass," he breathed, "an' may the Vargin forgive me for sayin' that same."

"Why bad luck to the cross?" demanded Lesbia, coming to the point.

"An' how shud I know, me dear?"

"But you do know," she insisted. "Tim, your mother gave me that cross."

"Did she now?—the owd fool."

"How dare you, Tim, and Bridget dead? She was your mother."

"'Deed an' well she might be, miss, for an uglier owd woman nivr could be found in County Clare, forby she left it for this blissid country whin I wor a gossoon."

"Did my father bring her over from Ireland, Tim?"

"Not he," Tim shook his Judas-coloured head. "Divil an eye did the pair av us clap on the gentleman for many a long day. Wasn't I a bare-futted brat runnin' wild about Whitechapel till my father—rest his sowl—was tuck by the police for shop-liftin'—bad luck to thim? An' he died in gaol, poor man—ah, that he did, lavin' me mother an' me widout bread in the mouths av us."

"What did Bridget do then, Tim?"

"Sure, she come to Wimbleton or a place hard by," admitted Tim reluctantly, "sellin' apples an' nuts, an' a mighty bad thing she made by the sale."

"I want to know exactly how she came to be my nurse?" said Lesbia.

Tim bent over the potatoes, deeply interested in the peeling. "Why, miss, your father—" here he swallowed something—"the masther, miss, and a kind, good gentleman, tuck pity on her and give her the situation as your nurse, me dear."

"But my mother?"

"Oh, howly saints, an' how cud she say anything whin she was dyin' an' you but a year old? But my mother nursed you like her own choild, miss, till ye went to that school at Hampstead. But ye came back here just whin she was dyin', poor sowl."

"I did, a year ago," said Lesbia significantly, "and in time to receive the cross, Tim."

"May the father av lies fly away wid it!" groaned the drawf. "An' may the saints forgive me for the wicked wish."

"Whatever do you mean, Tim?"

"Mane! Ah, nivr ask me what I mane. But the crass isn't with ye now, an' ye'll be the betther widout it."

"Oh!" Lesbia slipped off the table with a heightened colour, "does that mean it is unlucky? I gave it to George, you see, and——"

"Ah, devil doubt but what you'd give the head av ye to Garge," grumbled Tim, taking up the tin of peeled potatoes. "Ah, well, 'tis betther he shud have it nor you, me dear."

"But why, but why?" asked Lesbia, frantic with curiosity.

"Ah, nivir ask me, miss," replied Tim enigmatically and departed to continue his culinary work; also—as she could see—to avoid further questioning.

Failing Tim, the girl resolved to learn what her father would say, when at dinner. This was a meal which Mr. Hale never missed, as he was devoted to the pleasures of the table and appreciated Tim's excellent cooking. He always arrayed himself in purple and fine linen to do justice to the viands set before him, and it was the rule of the cottage that Lesbia should also dress appropriately. Her father prided himself upon being ultra-civilised, and would have eaten a red herring with sartorial ceremony. The table was admirably laid with crystal and silver and valuable china, and—decorated with flowers in graceful vases—looked extremely pretty. Tim, in a livery of his master's devising, acted as butler; and the wines were as good as the food, which is saying a lot. Mr. Hale might live in a humble cottage and might mix with queer people, but he was a sybarite, who enjoyed the good things of this life artistically prepared. The room was beautifully furnished, and Lesbia was more beautiful than the room. Therefore, on this special night, Mr. Walter Hale had both his palate and his eye gratified. His ear was not ministered to quite so pleasantly, as, after dinner, and when Tim had left the room to prepare the coffee, he renewed the subject of the cross with his daughter.

"Lesbia," said he, fixing his eyes on her somewhat flushed face, and looking extremely high-bred, "why did you give away that cross?"

"Bridget, who presented it to me on her death-bed, said that I was to bestow it on the man I meant to marry. I have done so."

This was a very defiant speech, and Hale frowned.

"I shall not allow you to marry young Walker," he said distinctly.

Lesbia shrugged her shoulders with indifference. This was not the way to manage her. "I am sorry, father, as I have decided to become his wife."

"He has no money, you silly girl. I know for a fact that he is paid only a small salary by Michael Tait, who is a screw and a skinflint where his own pleasures are not concerned. Moreover, Walker has to support his widowed mother, and she is not likely to welcome a daughter-in-law who will curtail her comforts, such as they are. A hard woman, Lesbia, a very hard woman, my dear. I ought to know, as we have been acquainted for years."

The prospect did not seem alluring, but love sustained the girl. "George might get a better situation," she ventured to remark, a trifle anxiously. "Why," she added, this as though the thought had just struck her, "he might help you, father."

Hale spilt the port wine he was pouring into the glass. "What's that?"

"You need not speak crossly, father," replied Lesbia, puzzled by the sharpness of his tone. "I merely suggested that George might enter your office, and then he——"

The man rose suddenly and began to pace the room with the glass of wine in his hand. But the look he cast upon his daring child was so grim that the unfinished sentence died on her lips. "'George—might—enter—your—office!'" he repeated slowly, and ended with a cynical laugh. "Humph! I wonder now——" he laughed again and checked his speech. Then he finished his glass of wine and returned to the table. "When does Walker come to see you again?" he asked abruptly.

"To-morrow night at six o'clock," said Lesbia, promptly. "He rows down the river from Medmenham, or walks along the towing-path, every evening."

"A devoted lover, truly!" said Hale drily. "And how long has this pretty wooing been going on?"

"For a few months," said Lesbia, rather alarmed by the stern expression of her father's face. "Don't be angry. After all, it was you who introduced me to George."

"The more fool I, seeing his age and looks and poverty. Lesbia!"—he placed his knuckles on the table and leaned across it—"you must marry my friend, Captain Sargent."

"Ex-Captain Sargent," cried Lesbia scornfully, and rising unexpectedly. "I shall do nothing of the sort. I don't even like him."

"Pooh! Pooh! Pooh! He is a gentleman——"

"So is George."

Hale rapped the table sharply. "Do not interrupt, you minx. Sargent has retired from the army, it is true. But he has a good income and a pretty bungalow at Cookham. We were in the same regiment until I left some fifteen years ago; so I know him well. He will make an excellent husband—a very excellent husband indeed."

"But, father, he is nearly as old as you are."

"What of that? Sargent is a handsome man and looks young."

Lesbia bit her lip, and tapped her foot on the ground. "I sha'n't marry him."

Hale scowled. "You shall. I am your father, and you shall do as you are told, my dear. And if you don't marry Sargent you shall certainly not marry Walker, unless——" he stopped suddenly.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you get that cross back from him," stormed Hale angrily.

Lesbia was nothing if not direct, and the mystery of the cross piqued her exceedingly. She ventured on a leading question. "Why do you want that cross so much, father?"

"It belonged to your poor mother," said Mr. Hale sentimentally, "and means more to me than you can ever guess. I missed it from your mother's jewel-case when she died; but I never suspected that Bridget Burke, who was supposed to be the soul of honesty, had stolen it."

"No, no! I don't believe Bridget would have stole anything."

"Bridget would have done anything that suited her," retorted Hale grimly, "and if she came by the cross honestly—say by your mother giving it to her—why did she not let you show it to me?"

"I can't guess : perhaps she thought you would take it from me."

"I might and I might not," replied Hale hesitatingly, "but at all events I should not have allowed you to give it to young Walker. You must ask him to return it at once."

"I shall not," said Lesbia determinedly.

"You shall," cried Hale, and their eyes met like those of two duellists crossing swords. But the father's eyes fell first. "You dare to defy me?"

"Not exactly, but——"

"I want no explanations, thank you ; but I'll make a bargain with you. If Walker returns that cross he can have you as his wife. If not, I shall refuse to allow him to haunt the cottage or pay attentions to you. And remember, Lesbia, that I hold the purse-strings."

"George can keep me," panted Lesbia, her colour rising.

"George has to keep his mother. Marry him without a dowry and see what the Honourable Mrs. Aylmer Walker will say."

"You cannot give me a fortune, father."

"I can give you two thousand a year if you are obedient," said her father coolly, and walked towards the door. "Think it over, Lesbia," and he left her to meditate on the astounding news.

Lesbia was naturally astonished, since she never dreamed that her father was so wealthy. Everything in the cottage was good of its kind, and even luxurious, and the living was excellent. But at times Hale appeared to lack ready money, and frequently impressed upon Tim that it was necessary to be economical. Why then should he act in this way when he appeared to be rich, and why should he offer so large an income on condition that the cross was returned? So far as Lesbia understood her father's hard nature, he was not a man to pay generously for a merely sentimental idea.

However, the fact remained that if she could get the amethyst cross returned, she could marry George and bring him a substantial dowry. After much reflection she determined to ask George for the ornament. After all, she could easily give him something else, and it

was worth satisfying her father when so much was at stake.

For half a moment Lesbia thought that she would put on her cloak and hat, and walk along the towing-path to Medmenham in the hope of meeting her lover. It was now half-past eight, as dinner had taken place at seven.

Mr. Hale had gone out, and Tim, as was his custom on fine evenings, was paddling about in a boat on the river, sometimes rowing, sometimes fishing. She was alone, and the solitude was becoming irksome. A great wave of desire for love and sympathy came over the girl, and she longed to see George Walker immediately, not only to tell him of her father's offer, but to be petted and kissed and comforted. But a few minutes' reflection showed her that it was not advisable that she should walk alone to Medmenham, especially as the chances were that she might not meet her lover. It was true that he would certainly be at home, but Lesbia did not know Mrs. Walker and, from the description given by her father, hesitated to meet the formidable lady. On the whole, then, she decided, it was better to wait till George came as usual on the ensuing evening.

Being alone, it was difficult to find entertainment. Lesbia played the piano for a few minutes: then she read and afterwards enjoyed a game or two of patience. Finally, feeling bored in the lonely house, she retired to bed about ten o'clock. There she speedily fell asleep and dreamed that all obstacles were removed, and she was George Walker's wife. When she put out her light neither Mr. Hale nor Tim had returned.

Lesbia's sleep lasted for some considerable time. Then she suddenly sat up with her senses keenly alive to every sensation. It seemed to her that George had called her, and that she had awakened in answer to his cry. And it was a cry for help, too! With a sensation of alarm, she sprang from her bed, and opened the lattice to look down the garden and across the river. There it flowed silvery in the calm moonlight: but she heard no cry and saw nothing. Yet the call for help had been very distinct. Lesbia was not superstitious, and had it been broad daylight she would have laughed

at such midnight fancies. But in the mysterious moonlight—alone in the house so far as she knew—and at the hour of twelve o'clock, her heart beat rapidly, and a cold perspiration broke out on her forehead. George was in danger : she was sure of that. And George had called to her in a dream. What was she to do ? In which direction was she to look ?

The first idea that came into her head was to see Tim, and explain. He would not laugh at her fancies, as he had many of his own. Lesbia threw on her dressing-gown and slipped her feet into shoes, and went down the narrow staircase, taking a lighted candle with her. In the hall all was quiet, and she paused here for a single moment, wondering if it was worth while to awaken Tim with such a fantastical story of midnight terrors.

Just as she was deciding it would be wiser to return to bed, she heard a groan, and in her fright nearly dropped the candle. But being a brave girl she plucked up courage and listened. There came a second groan—from the parlour. Lesbia immediately opened the door and entered. There on the floor she saw a man bound and gagged and stiff, with nothing alive about him but his eyes. And those were the eyes of George Walker.

CHAPTER III

ANOTHER MYSTERY

LESBIA HALE was small, fragile and, in a degree, romantic ; but, in sufficiently strange contrast, her frame was strong and her nature practical. An ordinary girl would have screamed and fainted, or perhaps would have run away. Lesbia did none of these things. She turned pale, it is true, and she trembled violently as she stared with dilated eyes at the bound form of her lover. Then it came upon her with a rush that immediate aid was required, and without even calling for Tim, she set down her candlestick on a convenient chair, and knelt beside the unfortunate young man. He was certainly in a very bad way ; but how he came to be in such a plight, Lesbia, with characteristic common sense, did not wait to inquire. The first thing was to loosen him

and revive him with wine : then she could ask questions. The answers promised to be interesting.

First she dexterously removed the handkerchief from across his mouth, with which George had been gagged in a clumsy manner. This she threw aside with a passing thought that later she would learn to whom it belonged, and then proceeded to loosen the knot of the rope with which her lover was bound. There was only one rope and only one knot, and when she had disentangled the somewhat complicated fastening, she unwound the cord which curled round him from his broad shoulders to his ankles. With his arms glued to his sides and his feet pressed closely together, George Walker had been tied up with yards of brand-new manila rope, so that he could not move, and was trussed as stiffly as any fowl prepared for the market. And the person or persons who had bound him thus, to make assurance doubly sure, had struck him a heavy blow on the back of his head. Lesbia discovered this by the half-dry blood which clotted his curly hair.

"What does it all mean?" asked Lesbia, when George was free from his bonds, and was lying almost as stiffly without them as when bound. But the young man did not reply, for the very good reason that he had fainted. At once Lesbia kissed him, and then went to the parlour door to summon Tim.

She called loudly, quite heedless of the fact that she might waken her father, who did not approve of young Walker, and even if he did not, it was necessary that he should come to aid the unfortunate man. So while the French clock on the mantelpiece struck a silvery twelve, Lesbia shouted at the full pitch of her healthy young lungs. In a few minutes the alarmed voice of Tim was heard, and by the time she was again kneeling beside George, the dwarf shuffled hurriedly into the dimly-lighted room, half-dressed, a candle in one hand and the kitchen poker in the other.

"The saints be betwixt us and harm, Miss Lesbia," cried Tim, who looked scared out of his senses, "what's come to you?"

"What's come to George, you mean," said Lesbia, looking up. "See Tim, I heard him call me a few minutes ago, and came downstairs to find him bound and

wounded. Don't stand there shaking and don't chatter. Get the brandy and heat some water. He has fainted and we must bring him to his senses."

"But how the devil did Masther Garge come here?" demanded Tim, aghast.

"How should I know?" retorted Lesbia, impatiently. "We can ask him when he is able to speak. Go and do what I tell you while I waken my father."

"Sure, the masther isn't in, miss," expostulated Tim, backing towards the door. "He wint out afther dinner to spind the night wid Captain Sargent at Cookham. An' that we shud have the bad luck av this, while he's away. Oh, Miss Lesbia, wasn't it burglars I was thinking av? But nivir murder, save the mark, an' sudden death at that."

"It will be sudden death if you don't get that brandy. Stop!" Lesbia started to her feet. "I'll get it myself. Go and heat the water to bathe his wound."

She ran into the dining-room and procured the spirit while Tim went to stoke up the kitchen fire. Lesbia forced George's teeth apart and poured the brandy wholesale down his throat. The ardent liquor revived him, and he opened his eyes with a faint sigh. "Don't speak, darling," she whispered, with a second kiss, and then set to work chafing his limbs. By the time Tim appeared with a jug of boiling water, the young man had quite recovered his senses, and attempted to explain.

"No," said Lesbia sharply, "you are too weak as yet. Bring a basin, Tim, and a sponge. We must bathe his head."

Considering she had no practice Lesbia performed her Good Samaritan task very dexterously and, having sponged the wound—a nasty, jagged blow from some blunt instrument—bound up her lover's head with that cleverness and tenderness which come from love. When he had quite recovered—save for a trifling weakness—she made him lie down on the sofa, and fed him with weak brandy and water. Tim meanwhile lighted the lamp, and exhausted himself in guessing the reason for the condition of young Walker. "It's that blissid crass," moaned Tim, moving round like an unquiet ghost, "bad luck to the same! Didn't I say it wud bring throuble?"

"You did, Tim, you did," assented Lesbia, who was seated by the now recovered man, and looking somewhat weary after her exertions, "but as George is comparatively well, he can explain."

"The cross is quite safe," said Walker faintly. "I left it at home. Oh, my head, how it aches! No wonder, when such a heavy blow was struck."

"Who struck it, dear?" inquired Lesbia.

"I don't know." George's voice was weary. "It's a long story."

"Drink some more of this," said Lesbia, holding the glass to his pale lips, "and wait until you feel stronger."

"Oh, I'm much better now," he replied, pushing the brandy and water away, "but I shan't be able to go to the office to-morrow morning."

"Begad, it's to-morrow morning already!" said Tim, glancing at the clock. "Half-past twelve as I'm a sinner, an' here's Miss Lesbia an' mesilf sittin' up like the quality. Oh, the sowl av me, what will the mather say?"

"What can he say?" demanded Miss Hale tartly. "Father can't hold you and me accountable for the unexpected."

"Unexpected, indeed," breathed George. "Who would have thought that I should be struck down on the towing-path? I can't guess the reason for the attack, Lesbia; it's beyond me."

"The crass! the crass!" muttered Tim, shaking his shaggy head.

"What do you know about it?" demanded Lesbia.

"Divil a thing, but that it brings bad luck," answered Tim sturdily.

"It is not altogether bad luck that George has been brought here for me to attend to him," she retorted.

"No, dear," Walker patted her hand, "this accident shows me what an angel you are. But how did I come here?"

"Don't you know who brought you?"

"I know nothing from the time I was struck down on the towing-path near Medmenham, until the moment I saw you standing in yonder doorway with a candle in your hand."

Lesbia knitted her pretty brows. "I can't understand. Some enemy has——"

"I have no enemies," murmured George positively.

"Then it's a mystery," declared the girl, still more perplexed. "Tell me exactly what took place."

Walker passed his hand wearily across his forehead, for his head ached considerably. "After leaving you with your father, darling, I rowed back to Medmenham, and went home to the cottage. My mother was not within, as she had gone up to town early in the day and did not intend to return until to-morrow——"

"That's to-day, begob!" interpolated Tim, again looking at the clock.

"Then it is to-day she returns," said Walker, in a stronger voice, "about three in the afternoon. But to continue, Lesbia, I had my dinner and smoked a pipe. Then I grew restless, wondering if you were having a bad time with your father on my account. I thought he would make things unpleasant for you, and determined to come down and see what had happened. That was about ten o'clock."

Lesbia patted his hand. "You need not have troubled, dear. My father and I got on very well together."

"I did not know that, and so was anxious. I ferried over the river to the towing-path, and walked down towards Marlow, intending to cross the bridge and come here."

"I was in bed at ten."

"So soon? I thought you might be sitting up."

"Well, I did not expect you, dear," exclaimed the girl. "As Tim was out on the river, and my father had gone away, I found it dull. I went to bed because I could think of nothing else to do. Then I fancied I heard you calling for help, and came down to find you gagged and bound."

"I did not call for help, because I was gagged," said George, "and almost insensible. I expect you were dreaming."

"A very serviceable dream too," said Lesbia drily. "Go on, George darling"

"About half-way between Medmenham and Marlow, while I was walking along in the moonlight I heard a soft step behind me, and turned to see a man almost

on top of me. I had not even time to see what he was like, so quickly did he attack me. Aiming a blow at my head with a bludgeon, he struck me hard, and I fell insensible on the path."

"And then?"

"Then I woke to find you looking at me in this room. That's all."

Lesbia examined her lover searchingly. He wore white flannel trousers, a silk shirt, a white flannel coat, and brown shoes. His panama hat was missing.

Then Lesbia uttered an exclamation, and pointed to his pockets. All these, both in coat and trousers, were turned inside out, and the buttons of his shirt were undone, as though he had been searched to the skin. "It's robbery," said Lesbia firmly.

"Robbery! Impossible! Why should anyone rob a pauper like me? I have nothing."

"You have the crass!" murmured Tim, who was squatting on the floor, and who looked like a goblin.

"Tim!" It was Lesbia who spoke. "Do you think that Mr. Walker was attacked to get the amethyst cross?"

"Faith, an' I can't say, miss. But me mother—rest her sowl—towld me that the crass brought bad luck, and it's come to Masther Garge here. Maybe it's only talk, but there you are," and he pointed to the young man.

Walker reflected for a moment or so, while Lesbia turned over Tim's explanation in her mind. "I dare say he is right," said George pensively, "and you also Lesbia. I was rendered insensible so that I might be robbed, as is proved by my pockets being turned inside out. As the only article of value I possessed was the cross, and I only acquired that yesterday evening, I expect it was the cross this man was after. If so, he must be very much disappointed, for I left your gift in the drawer of my dressing-table, before I came to see you at ten o'clock."

"What was the man like?"

"I told you that I only caught a glimpse of him," said Walker fretfully, for the conversation wearied him. "He seemed to be a tall man, and was roughly dressed. His soft hat was pulled over his eyes, and—and I know nothing more about him."

Seeing that he was still weak, Lesbia stood up. "You can lie on the sofa and go to sleep," she said softly. "To-morrow morning we can talk."

"But I have to get to London by the eight o'clock train—the office!"

"Bother the office!" said Lesbia inelegantly. "You are not fit to go to the office. Try to sleep. Tim, give me that rug you brought. There, dear," she tucked him in. "I have left a glass of water beside you. Tim can come in every now and then to see how you are."

"Augh," groaned Tim, yawning, "it's just as well, miss. I culdn't slape forty winks, wid blue murther about. But the masther will come back after breakfast, an' what will we say at all, at all?"

"Say," snapped Lesbia, who was at the door, looking extremely weary. "Tell the truth, of course. My father will quite approve of what we have done. George, don't talk to Tim, who is a chatterbox, but go to sleep. You will need all you can get, poor boy."

George, already nearly asleep, murmured an incoherent reply and, leaving Tim to watch over him, Lesbia returned to her room, but not to sleep for at least an hour. Lying on her bed, she tried to fathom the mystery of this assault upon her unoffending lover. Apparently the cross had to do with the matter, as George had never been attacked before. And then in a flash the girl remembered that her father was desirous of regaining the ornament, and apparently, from the way in which he had talked, was prepared to go to great lengths to get it. Could it be that he had struck down her lover? He had been absent all the evening, and would be absent all the night, at Sargent's Cookham cottage, according to the message he had left with Tim. He did not like Walker, and moreover was tall, as the assailant had been. It really seemed as though Mr. Walter Hale had taken the law into his own hands and, to get back his property, as he averred the cross to be, had committed something uncommonly like highway robbery. Lesbia worried over the problem half the night, as she could not believe that her father would act so basely. Finally, towards dawn she fell into an uneasy sleep.

It was ten o'clock when she woke, and at once her

thoughts reverted to the late exciting event. No such sensational happening had ever before disturbed the quietness of the riverside cottage, and the mystery which environed it was an added fascination. As Lesbia slowly dressed—and in her prettiest frock for the sake of George,—she again wondered if her father was connected with the assault and the attempted robbery.

George could only have been attacked for the sake of the amethyst cross, and her father alone—so far as she knew—desired that cross. Yet if Mr. Hale was guilty, why had he brought his victim into his own house? No one else could have brought George, for no one else could have entered. Lesbia had no great love for her father, since he invariably repelled all her proffers of affection; but she now felt that she could actively hate him for his wickedness in so dealing with the man she loved. And yet, as she reflected when she descended the stairs, she could not be sure that her father was guilty, even in the face of such evidence.

When Lesbia entered the dining room she found George quite his old self. The night's rest had done him good, and a cold bath had refreshed him greatly. With Tim's willing assistance he had made himself presentable and, save for a linen bandage round his head, looked much the same as he had done on the previous evening. He came forward swiftly and with sparkling eyes, and took Lesbia in his arms, murmuring soft and foolish words, after the way of lovers even less romantic.

"Darling! Darling! Darling! How good you have been to me."

"I could have done no less for anyone," replied Lesbia, leading him to a chair. "Sit down, dearest, you are still weak."

"On the contrary, I am quite strong, although my head still aches a trifle from that cowardly blow. Besides, I am hungry, and there is Tim bringing in a magnificent breakfast. Sweetest and best," he went on, leading her to the well-spread table, "this is just as if we were married. You at the top of the table and I at the bottom. Give me a cup of coffee, Lesbia, and I'll serve out the eggs and ham. Tim, you needn't wait."

Tim grumbled a trifle, as he loved to wait on Lesbia. But he was an Irishman and appreciated a love affair.

It did not need much cleverness to see that young Walker wished to be alone with his beloved, if only to enjoy the unique situation. Tim therefore departed, and the couple had their breakfast in heavenly solitude. Lesbia wished to talk about the adventure on the towing-path, and to ask questions, but George positively refused to speak of anything save the most frivolous matters.

"Your father will return soon," he explained, passing his cup for more coffee, "and then I shall have to tell my story all over again. Let us talk about ourselves and of our future."

Lesbia, after a faint resistance, was only too pleased to obey, so they had an extremely pleasant meal. The room was cheerful with the summer sun, which poured in floods of light and warmth through the windows, and the feeling of spring was still in the air. Most prosaically they enjoyed their food and unromantically ate a large breakfast, but all the time they kept looking at one another and relishing the novel situation. It was brought to an end only too speedily by the sudden entrance of Mr. Hale. Tall, lean, cold and stern, he appeared on the threshold, and stared in surprise at the way in which young Walker was taking possession not only of his house but of his daughter.

"What the devil does this mean?" asked Hale, politely indignant.

"Look at George's head!" cried Lesbia with a shiver, for her doubts returned fortyfold at the sight of her aristocratic father.

"That explains nothing," said Hale drily. "Perhaps, Mr. Walker, you will undertake to tell me how it comes that I find you making yourself at home in my poor abode?"

George, who was perfectly cool and collected, told his story. Hale listened, much more discomposed than he chose to appear, and at the conclusion of the narrative asked one question, which showed where his thoughts were.

"The cross," he said eagerly, "have you been robbed of the cross?"

"No," answered Walker positively, "although I believe that I was attacked for the sake of it. But

luckily I left it in the drawer of my dressing-table. Can you guess who attacked me?"

"No," said Hale coolly, "I cannot."

"Still, if you know about the cross——"

"I only know that it belonged to my wife and that I want to get it back as soon as possible. Lesbia should never have given it to you. As to your being attacked so that you might be robbed of it, I can't believe that story. The cross, as a jewel, is not so very valuable. Besides, no one but myself and Lesbia and Tim knew that you had it. I presume," ended Hale, in his most sarcastic manner, "that you do not suspect any one of us three."

"Oh no," rejoined Walker promptly, and spoke as he believed in spite of the troubled look which Lesbia cast on him. "Still——"

Hale threw up his hand to interrupt. "We can talk of your adventure later, Mr. Walker. After all, the cross may have something to do with the way in which you were assaulted, although—as I said—it appears unlikely. I want to recover it immediately, and am the more eager, now that I have heard of your adventure. Give me a note to your mother saying that the cross is to be given to me, and I shall consent to your marriage with Lesbia."

George looked at the girl, who nodded. "Let my father have back the cross, since he so greatly desires it," she said. "I can give you something else, dear. I am willing to pay that price for my father's consent."

George shrugged his shoulders. "It is immaterial to me," he said calmly, "so long as you are pleased, dear. I only wished to keep the ornament as your first love-gift to me. Have you a pencil, Mr. Hale? Thank you."

He scribbled a note. "To Jenny, our maid-servant," he explained, when handing it to the tall, silent man. "She will admit you to my bedroom, and you will find the cross in the right-hand drawer of my dressing-table."

"But your mother——"

"My mother went to London yesterday and will not be back until three o'clock to-day. If you like to wait I can go over with you later."

"No," said Hale brusquely, "your mother might

make objections. I know how difficult she is to deal with. I'll go myself : you stay here with Lesbia."

George was nothing loath, and when Hale had departed he walked with his beloved in the garden. They should have talked of the adventure, and Lesbia should have told George the thought that was uppermost in her mind—namely, that her father was cognisant of the assault. But she did not care to make such an accusation upon insufficient grounds, and moreover hesitated to accuse her father of such a crime. She therefore willingly agreed to postpone all talk of the adventure until Mr. Hale's return, and surrendered herself to the pleasure of the moment. The lovers spent a long morning in the garden of love, gathering the rosebuds which Herrick recommends should be culled in youth. Time flew by on golden wings, and Hale was no sooner gone all the way to Medmenham than he seemed to come back. He could not have been away for more than five minutes, as it appeared to these two enthralled by Love. For them time had no existence.

But their dream of love fled when Hale came swiftly down the path looking both angry and alarmed, and, indeed, perplexed. "The cross has gone," he said.

"Impossible!" cried George, starting to his feet, astonished. "I left it——"

"The cross has gone," repeated Hale decisively. "Your cottage has been robbed, burgled I repeat, the cross has gone."

CHAPTER IV

A FAMILY HISTORY

AFTER delivering his message of woe, Mr. Hale sat down on the garden seat under the chestnut tree, and mechanically flicked the dust from his neat brown shoes with a silk handkerchief. He was perfectly arrayed as usual, and on account of the heat of the day wore a suit of spotless drill, cool and clean-looking. But if his clothes were cool he certainly was not, for his usually colourless face was flushed a deep red and his eyes sparkled with anger. Lesbia, who had risen with George, looked at him with compunction in her heart. After all

—so her thoughts ran—she had suspected her father wrongly. If he had attacked George to regain this unlucky cross, he assuredly would not now be lamenting its loss. And yet if he were innocent, who was guilty, considering the few people who knew that the ornament was in existence? Tim might—but it was impossible to suspect Tim Burke, who was the soul of honesty.

“Well,” said Hale crossly, “what is to be done?”

He looked directly at George, who faced him standing, with a look of perplexity on his handsome face. “Are you sure that the house has been robbed?” he asked doubtfully.

Mr. Hale shrugged his shoulders. “I usually say what I mean,” he remarked acridly. “I took your note to Medmenham, and found the local policeman conversing with your mother’s servant. From her I learned what had taken place, and, indeed, she was telling the constable when I came up.”

“Well?”

“It seems,” pursued Hale, producing a cigar, “that Jenny—as she is called——”

“Yes, yes!” broke in Walker impatiently, “go on.”

“Well, then, Jenny rose this morning to find the window of the drawing-room wide open. Nothing was touched in that room. But your bedroom was ransacked thoroughly. Your clothes were strewn about, and apparently every pocket had been examined. The drawers were opened, and even the bed had been overhauled. There was no sign of the burglar, and Jenny swears that—sleeping at the back of the house—she heard nothing.”

“And what has been stolen?” asked Lesbia, hesitatingly.

“Only the cross.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely! I gave Jenny the note, and together with the policeman—who, by the way, is a bucolic idiot—she took me to the bedroom. I examined the right-hand drawer, which was open, as were all the other drawers, and found that the cross was missing. Jenny declared that nothing else had been taken. Of course the girl was in a great state of alarm, as she was the sole person in the house, and she feared lest she should

be accused. Also, and very naturally, she was surprised at your being away, Walker."

George nodded. "I daresay. It is rarely that I sleep away from home, and when I do I give notice. Humph!" He sat down on the grass opposite Mr. Hale and gripped his ankles. "What do you think, sir?"

Hale made a vague motion of despair. "What can I think? I know as much as you do, and nothing more. Would you mind my putting you in the witness-box, Walker?"

"By no means. Ask what questions you desire."

"And I shall be counsel for the defence," said Lesbia, sitting down beside her lover with rather a wry smile. It appeared to her that Mr. Hale wished to recall his offer to let the marriage take place: also that he wished to get George into trouble if he could. But how he proposed to do so the girl could not tell. However, she was anxious, and listened with all her ears. Mr. Hale raised his eyebrows at her odd speech, but took no further notice of it. He was too much interested in his examination.

"Lesbia," said Mr. Hale quietly, "gave you the cross yesterday evening in my presence, so to speak. What did you do with it?"

"I slipped it into my breast-pocket," said Walker promptly, "and rowed back to Medmenham, as you saw. On arriving, I placed it for safety in the drawer of my dressing table. Then, later, as I explained at breakfast, I came down to see Lesbia and was assaulted by an unknown man."

"Did you show the cross to anyone, say to Jenny?"

"No. And if I had shown it to Jenny it would not have mattered. You do not suspect an honest girl like her, I presume?"

"Honest girls may yield to the temptation of stealing such a fine ornament as the cross," said Hale drily. "However, it may set your mind at rest if I say that I don't suspect Jenny. Had she stolen the cross, she would not have had the imagination to upset the room and leave the window open, so as to suggest burglary. But think again, Walker; did you show the cross to anyone after leaving this garden?"

"No," said George positively, "I certainly did not, that is, not voluntarily."

"Ah! then some one else did see it," said Hale, with satisfaction and marked eagerness. "Come, man, speak up."

"I had almost forgotten," said Walker slowly. "Perhaps the blow on my head made me forget; but I remember now."

"Remember what?" asked Lesbia, as eager as her father.

"That those gipsies saw the cross."

"Gipsies?" Hale and his daughter glanced at one another.

"Yes. I was walking up the lane to my home when I passed a gipsy encampment. While doing so I pulled out my handkerchief, and the cross—which I had placed in my breast-pocket—fell out. The handkerchief twitched it, I suppose. It flashed down on the grass, and the glitter caught the eye of a man lounging near the caravan. He came forward and pointed out where it had fallen, as I had not noticed its whereabouts for the moment. By the time I picked it up two or three of the gipsies had gathered round, and they saw me restore it to my pocket. Then I thanked the man and went home."

Lesbia clapped her hands. "Why, it is perfectly plain," she cried, delighted. "That man must have assaulted you on the towing-path to steal the cross. Not finding it on you, he robbed the house. What do you think father?"

Hale nodded. "I think as you do. So the best thing to be done will be to come and see the constable, or the inspector here in Marlow. We must have those gipsies searched before they go away. The encampment was still there this morning; but I saw signs of removal."

George leaped to his feet. "Yes, it must be so," he cried eagerly. "I daresay the man robbed me—the cross being flamboyant is just the thing which would attract him."

"Then we must see the inspector. I must get the cross back. It is a pity I remained at Cookham last night with Sargent. Had I been here, I should have gone at once to Medmenham."

"But it was midnight, father."

"I don't care. The mere fact that Walker here was assaulted would have proved to me that the cross was wanted. Since he had left it at home the thief would probably have burgled the house. I might have caught him red-handed. Oh, why didn't I come home last night?"

Mr. Hale was genuinely moved over the loss of the ornament. And yet Lesbia could not think that it was mere sentimental attachment thereto, as having belonged to his dead wife, that made him so downcast. Also in itself the cross was of comparatively little value. Lesbia's suspicions returned, and again she dismissed them as unworthy. Moreover, if Hale had assaulted George and had committed a burglary he would not be so eager to set the police on the track. Whosoever was guilty, he at least must be innocent. Cold as her father was to her, and little affection as she bore him, it was agreeable to find that he was honest—though, to be sure, every child expects to find its parents above reproach. Perhaps a sixth sense told Lesbia that her father was not all he should be. In no other way could she guess how she came to be so ready to think ill of him. But up to the present she had suspected him wrongly, and so was pleased.

Hale and young Walker went to the Marlow police-office and explained in concert what had occurred. The officer in charge of the station heard their tale unmoved, as it was nothing more exciting than a robbery by a vagabond. He went with them personally to Medmenham, and there met the village constable, who presented his report. This did not include any reference to gipsies. His superior—whose name was Parson—questioned him, and learned that the thief or thieves had left no trace behind, and—on the evidence of Jenny the maid—had stolen nothing save the cross. Parson then went to Mrs. Walker's house and questioned the girl.

Jenny was naturally much agitated, but was reassured by George, who declared that no one suspected her. "I should think not, sir," she cried, firing up and growing red. "I didn't even know the cross you speak of was in the house. You never showed it to me, sir."

"No," acknowledged Walker truthfully, "I certainly did not."

"Did you see any of those gipsies lurking about the house?" asked Parson.

"No," said Jenny positively, "I did not. Mr. George went out for a walk at ten o'clock, and I lay down at half-past. I never knew anything, or heard anything, or guessed anything. When I got up at seven as usual, and went to dust the drawing-room, I found the window open. And that didn't scare me, as I thought Mr. George might have opened it when he got up."

"But you knew that he was not in the house?" said Hale alertly.

"I never did, sir. I went to wake him after I found the drawing-room window open, and found that he hadn't been to bed. The room was upset too, just as you saw it. If I'd known that I was alone in the cottage I should have been scared out of my life; but I thought Mr. George came in late, and had gone to bed as usual. I nearly fainted, I can tell you," cried Jenny tearfully. "Fancy a weak girl like me being left alone with them horrid gipsies down the lane! But I slept through it all, and I never saw no gipsies about. When I saw the bedroom upset and that Mr. George wasn't there, I called in Quain the policeman. That's all I know, and if missus does give me notice when she comes back I'd have her know that I'm a respectable girl as doesn't rob anyone."

Jenny had much more to say on the subject, but all to no purpose; so the three men went to the camp. They found the vagrants making preparations to leave, and shortly were in the middle of what promised to be a free fight. The gipsies were most indignant at being accused, and but for a certain awe of the police would certainly have come to blows with those who doubted their honesty. The man who had seen the cross accounted for his movements on the previous night. He was in the village public-house until eleven, so could not have assaulted Walker on the towing-path, and afterwards was in bed in one of the caravans, as was deposed to by his wife. In fact, every member of this particular tribe—they were mostly Lovels from the New Forest—proved that he or she had nothing to do with either the assault or burglary. Finally, Parson, entirely beaten, departed with the other two

men, and the gipsies proceeded to move away in a high state of indignation.

"Do you really think that they are innocent?" asked Hale, who surveyed the procession of outgoing caravans with a frown.

"Yes, I do," said Parson, who was not going to be taught his business by any civilian.

"So do I," struck in Walker. "All the men who saw the cross have accounted for their whereabouts last night. They were not near my mother's house, nor across the river on the towing-path."

Hale smiled drily. He had no opinion of Walker's intelligence, or of that which Mr. Parson possessed. "Rogues and vagabonds—as these people are—stand by one another, and will swear to anything to keep one of their number out of gaol. I don't put much faith in the various alibis. You should have searched the caravans, officer."

"And men and women also, I suppose, sir," said Parson quietly. "I had no warrant to do so, let me remind you. Even gipsies have their privileges under English law. Also, if any one of these men was guilty, he could easily have passed the cross to one of the women, or buried it. I might have searched and found nothing, only to lay myself open to a lecture from my superiors."

"Still," began Hale, unwilling to surrender his point of view, "let me remind you, Mr. Parson, that——"

"And let me remind you, sir," broke in the officer stiffly, "that only this ornament you speak of was stolen. If a gipsy had broken into the house he would certainly have taken other things. And again, no gipsy could have carried Mr. Walker into your parlour, seeing that not one member of the tribe is aware of your existence, much less where your cottage is situated. I am ignorant on that score myself."

Having thus delivered himself with some anger, for the supercilious demeanour of Hale irritated him, Parson strode away. He intimated curtly to the two men, as he turned on his heel, that if he heard of anything likely to elucidate the mystery he would communicate with them: also he advised them if they found a clue to see him.

Hale laughed at this last request. "I fancy I see myself placing the case in the hand of such a numskull."

George shook his head. "If you do not employ the police, who is to look into the matter?" he asked gravely.

The answer was unexpected.

"You are," said Hale, coldly and decisively.

George stopped—they were walking back to Marlow when this conversation took place—and stared in amazement at his companion. "Why, I am the very worst person in the world to help you," he said aghast.

"To help yourself, you mean. Remember I promised to consent to your marriage to Lesbia only on condition that I got back the cross."

"It is not my fault that the cross is lost."

"I never said that it was," retorted Hale, tartly. "All the same you will have to find it and return it to me before I will agree to your marriage with my daughter. It would have been much better had you handed it over to me last night."

"I daresay," said George, somewhat sulkily, "but I'm not the man to give up anything when the demand is made in such a tone as you used. Besides, I don't see how I can find the cross."

"Please yourself, my boy. But unless you do, Lesbia marries Sargent."

"Sargent!" The blood rushed to Walker's cheeks and his voice shook with indignation. "Do you mean to say that you would give your daughter to that broken rake, to that worn-out——"

"Ta! Ta! Ta!" said Hale, in an airy French fashion, and glad to see the young man lose his temper. "Sargent is my very good friend and was my brother officer when I was in the army. He would make Lesbia an excellent husband, as he is handsome and well-off and amiable, and——"

"And an idiot, a gambler, and a——"

"You'd better not let him hear you talk like that."

Walker laughed. "I fear no one, let me tell you, Mr. Hale. Mr. Sargent, or Captain Sargent as he calls himself——"

"He has every right to call himself so. He was a captain."

"It is not usually thought good manners to continue the title after a man has left the army," said George drily, and recovering his temper, which he saw he should never have lost with a hardened man like Hale. "You, for instance, do not call yourself——"

"There! There! that's enough, Walker," cried the elder man impatiently. "You know my terms. That cross and my consent: otherwise Lesbia marries Sargent."

"She loves me: she will never obey you," cried the lover desperately.

"I shall find means to compel her consent," said Hale coldly. "Surely, Mr. Walker, you have common sense at your age. Sargent has money and a certain position: you have neither."

"I can make a position."

"Then go and do so. When you are rich and highly placed we can talk."

Hale was as hard as iron and as cold. There seemed to be no chance of getting what was wanted by appealing to his tender feelings, since he had none whatsoever. But after swift reflection Walker thought of something which might make the man change his mind.

"Listen, Mr. Hale," he said, when Lesbia's father was on the point of moving away from a conversation which he found unprofitable and disagreeable. "I did not intend to tell you, but as my engagement with Lesbia is at stake I will make a clean breast of it."

Hale wheeled round with a cold light in his eyes. "Are you going to confess that you stole the cross and got up a comedy to hide the theft?"

George laughed. "I am not clever enough for that. But it is about a possible fortune that I wish to speak—one that may come to me through my mother."

"A fortune." Hale flushed, for only the mention of money could touch his hard nature. "I never knew that your mother had money."

"She has not now, but she may have."

"Go on," said Hale, seeing that the young man hesitated, and watching him with glittering eyes. "I have known your mother for years, but she never told me either that she had money or expected any."

"I should not tell you either," said Walker bluntly,

"and so I hesitated. I have no business to interfere with my mother's affairs. However, I must speak since I want to marry Lesbia."

"I am all attention."

"My grandfather left his large fortune equally divided between his two daughters. One was my mother; and her husband, my father, ran through the lot, leaving her only a trifle to live on. I help to keep her."

"This," said Hale coldly, "I already know."

"But what you don't know is that my aunt—my mother's sister, that is—ran away with some unknown person during her father's lifetime. He was angry, but forgave her on his deathbed and left her a fair share of the money—that is half. As my mother inherited fifty thousand, there is an equal amount in the hands of Mr. Simon Jabez, a lawyer in Lincoln's Inn Fields, waiting for my aunt should she ever come back."

"And if she does not?" asked Hale anxiously

"Then, if her death can be proved, the money comes to my mother."

"Humph! But you say your aunt ran away with someone—to marry the man, I suppose. What if there is a child?"

Walker's face fell. "The child inherits," he said softly.

Hale laughed harshly. "You have found a mare's nest," he said coolly, "and I see no reason to change my decision with regard to your possible marriage with Lesbia. Your aunt may be alive and may appear to claim the money. If she is dead, her child or children may come forward. On the other hand, if your mother does come in for the fifty thousand pounds you speak of, she is, as I know, a hard woman."

"I agree with you," said the young man, moodily and sadly. "She is as hard as you are, Mr. Hale. But if she inherits my grandfather's money—that is, my aunt's share—she has no one to leave it to but me. I am an only child."

"Your mother," said Hale deliberately, "is hard, as you say; that is, she is as sensible as I am. If you marry against her will, she will not leave you one

farthing of this money, which, after all, may never come into her possession."

"But why should she object to Lesbia?" asked George. "When she meets her and sees how lovely she is——"

"Bah!" Hale looked scornful. "You talk like a fool. As if any woman was ever moved by the beauty of another woman! Besides, your mother hates me; we are old enemies, and rather than see you marry my daughter she would go to your funeral with joy. If you married against her will—as you assuredly would in making Lesbia your wife—she would leave you nothing. And I also dislike the match on account of your mother."

"But why are you her enemy, and she yours?" asked George bewildered.

"That is a long story and one which I do not intend to relate unless driven to speak. If Lesbia marries you she will lose two thousand a year which I can give her when I die. If you want to drag the girl you love down to poverty, Mr. Walker, then marry her secretly. I tell you that if you make Lesbia your wife neither I nor your mother will help you."

"And yet you said——"

"That you could make Lesbia your wife if you found the cross. Yes, I did say that, and I will say it. If you get me the cross, you shall marry her and have two thousand a year when I die. But it would be wiser for you to leave Lesbia alone and marry——"

"Marry whom?" asked George, his cheeks flaming.

"Maud Ellis," retorted Hale with a sneering laugh, and turned away.

CHAPTER V

MRS. WALKER'S OPINION

AFTER that one extraordinary adventure which broke so remarkably the monotony of George Walker's life, things went very smoothly for a time. That is, they progressed in their usual humdrum way, which was trying to the young man's ambitious spirit. He wanted to marry Lesbia, to make a home for her, to attain

a position, which her beauty would adorn ; and he saw no means of doing so. He went regularly to the office, earned his small salary, and dreamed dreams which could never be realised, at least, there appeared to be no chance of realisation. What could a man of moderate attainments, with no money and no friends, hope to do in the way of cutting a figure in the world ? ”

Mrs. Walker duly returned home. Jenny gave her a highly-coloured account of the burglary, which she heard in stern silence. She was a tall, grim woman with a hard face and stiff manner, and was invariably arrayed in plain black gowns devoid of any trimming whatever. Her hair, still dark in spite of her age, was smoothed over her temples in the plain early Victorian manner, and her pale countenance was as smooth as that of a young girl. That she was a gentlewoman could easily be seen, but her manner was repellent and suspicious. Also, her thin lips and hard grey eyes did not invite sympathy. How such a puritanical person ever came to have a handsome, gracious son such as George, perplexed more than one person. The general opinion was that he inherited his looks and his charm of manner from his late father. Report credited the Honourable Aylmer Walker with more fascination than principle. Truth to tell, his posthumous reputation was better than the one he had when living.

Having ascertained the facts of the burglary, and the loss of the amethyst cross, Mrs. Walker held her peace, and did not discuss the subject with her son. George, indeed, ventured upon a lame explanation, which she received in dead silence. After the hint given by Mr. Hale, the young man was not desirous of disclosing his engagement to Lesbia, and a discussion about the stolen cross would inevitably lead to the truth becoming known to Mrs. Walker. Sooner or later he knew that he would have to speak, but he postponed doing so until he could see his future more clearly. If he could only procure a better place in the City, he could then afford to keep Lesbia in comparative comfort, and pass a love-in-a-cottage existence. But until he was in a position to do so, he avoided

confiding in his mother. Also, Mrs. Walker was not a sympathetic mother, and would certainly not have encouraged the young man's love-dream.

But one evening Mrs. Walker unexpectedly broached the subject at dinner. This was seven days after the adventure of the cross, and during that time George had never set eyes on Lesbia. Several times he had rowed as usual to the garden's foot, but had waited in vain for the girl's appearance. An inquiry at the house provoked no response, as neither Tim nor Lesbia came to the fast-closed door. George in despair had written, but to his anxious letter had received no reply. Lesbia remained silent and the cottage barred and bolted, so George began to believe that Hale had smuggled away his daughter, lest she should elope with the lover of whom he so strongly disapproved. This state of uncertainty wore Walker's nerves thin, and he lost his appetite and his nights' rest. Mechanically he went to Tait's office, did his daily work, and returned home again, fretting all the time after the girl who was beyond his reach. He even tried to see Mr. Hale, but that gentleman was conspicuous by his absence. Never was a lover in so dismal a situation.

On this special evening George, in evening dress, faced his silent mother at the dinner-table. Mrs. Walker wore a plain black silk gown, perfectly cut, but wholly unadorned. Like Mr. Hale, she always insisted upon a certain style being observed, and dined, so to speak, in state. The tiny room was well-furnished with the remnants of her former prosperity, and looked like the abode of a gentlewoman. Nothing could have been more perfect than the table appointments; and, if the food was plain, the way in which it was served left nothing to be desired. Jenny, neatly dressed, waited deftly and, at the conclusion of the dinner, placed a decanter of port before George, along with a silver box of cigarettes and a dainty silver spirit-lamp.

As a rule, Mrs. Walker withdrew at this moment to enjoy her coffee in the drawing-room, while George sipped his wine and trifled with a cigarette, but on this occasion she remained. "You can bring my coffee here," she said to Jenny, in her unemotional voice.

George wondered at this departure from the usual routine, for his mother had never broken the domestic rule she had instituted as far back as he could remember. However, he did not feel called upon to say anything, but poured out a glass of port and lit a cigarette. When Mrs. Walker had obtained her coffee, and Jenny had departed, she spoke to her son through the gathering twilight.

"I have received a letter from Mr. Hale," said Mrs. Walker in her coldest voice, and sat bolt upright with her eyes on the comely blonde face of her son.

"What!" George flushed and started and laughed nervously. "That is very strange," he said after a pause. "Mr. Hale has never written to you before."

"There are reasons why he should not have written to me before, as there are reasons why he writes to me now."

"May I know those reasons?" asked George quietly, but inwardly anxious.

"Certainly!" Mrs. Walker was disagreeable but excessively polite, as she never forgot her manners, whatever the provocation. "In fact, I have waited to explain them. But I think you had better tell me your story first."

"What story?"

"That of your engagement to Lesbia Hale, and of the cross which was stolen from this cottage."

"What!" George rose restlessly and grew redder than ever. "You know——"

"I know everything," said his mother imperiously. "Mr. Hale is annoyed by the way in which you are haunting his Marlow cottage, and has asked me to use my influence with you to stop the annoyance."

"That is quite likely," rejoined George, fuming, "but I decline to give up Lesbia. Mr. Hale knows that."

"He knows, apparently, that you are obstinate and foolish," said Mrs. Walker in a chilly manner. "And as your infatuation—for it is nothing else—can lead to nothing, I must ask you to stop these hopeless visits."

"Mother, if you knew Lesbia——"

"I know that Lesbia is the daughter of a man whom

I despise and hate," said Mrs. Walker, moved to cold anger, "and my son shall never marry her."

"You have not the power to stop the marriage," said George quietly.

"That is quite true. I have no money to threaten disinheritance, and no legal power over a man who is of age. I might indeed appeal to your affection, but I fear that it would be useless."

George flung his cigarette out of the window, and thrust his hands moodily into his pockets. "Affection is a strange word to use between us, mother," he remarked bitterly. "You have always been strict and straightforward, and painfully polite. You have given me a good education, and you have instructed me in good manners. My home," he looked round, "or rather your home you permit me to share."

"Pardon me, George, you forget that you contribute to the domestic economy of this home, such as it is. Go on."

"I mean," cried George desperately, for her manner chilled him, "that you have never been a mother to me in the accepted sense of the word."

"I have done my duty," said Mrs. Walker without flinching.

"Duty! duty! what is duty when I wanted love? I have lived in a freezing atmosphere which has nearly changed me into a statue. Can you wonder that I sought out someone to love?"

"Perhaps not, since you are young and foolish, but I regret that the someone should be a girl that I cannot possibly receive as my daughter-in-law."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded George sharply.

"Nothing detrimental to the girl," replied Mrs. Walker calmly. "She may have all the beauty in the world, and all the virtues, and probably has, in your eyes, but she is Walter Hale's daughter and so cannot be mine."

"Why do you hate Mr. Hale, mother?"

"That," said Mrs. Walker, sitting very upright, "is my private business."

"But when it interferes with my happiness——"

"I cannot help that," she said rigorously. "What is past is past, and what is dead is dead."

"I don't understand you."

"I do not mean that you should. But I would point out that your association with this girl has already led you into danger. You have been assaulted and robbed, and have come into contact with the police, which is always undesirable. Renounce Lesbia, George, lest worse befall."

"The robbery and the assault are mysteries."

"None the less they are dangerous. I can explain no more than you can; but Mr. Hale is a dangerous person, to my knowledge, and——"

"Tell me what you know," interpolated her son.

"No," said Mrs. Walker, with iron determination. "It would do no good to break the silence of years. All I can say is that you shall never marry the girl with my consent."

"And if I do without it," chafed George, irritably.

"Then you will never set eyes on me again," returned Mrs. Walker quietly.

"Mother!"

The woman calmly finished her coffee and rose noiselessly. "The time may come when I can explain," she said in her precise voice. "Meanwhile I can only command you or implore you—whichever you please—to leave this girl alone and go no more to the Marlow cottage."

"I don't see why I should obey you blindly," cried George angrily. "At least give me a reason for your objection to Lesbia."

"I have given it; she is the daughter of Walter Hale."

"And are the sins of the father—whatever they may be—to be visited upon the child, mother?"

"Quoting the Bible will not alter my determination," said Mrs. Walker, absolutely cold and impassive. "You must do as I request or be prepared to see me no more."

"Mother, can you not explain about this mysterious cross——?"

"No."

"You refuse to?"

"I mean that I cannot. I know nothing about the cross, or about the assault made on you, or indeed about the burglary. All I do know is that Mr. Hale

is a dangerous man, and is connected with dangerous people—what has occurred proves it.”

“But surely you don’t think that Mr. Hale is connected with these mysteries?”

“I think nothing because I know nothing!” She moved swiftly forward and placed a slim hand on her son’s broad shoulder. “Be wise and give up this girl. The wife who is waiting for you will suit you better.”

George grew crimson. “The wife!” he stammered.

“Maud Ellis! Mr. Tait’s niece. She loves you, and she has told me so. If you marry her she will bring you money, and her uncle will forward your interests. To-morrow you are stopping for the week-end at Mr. Tait’s house. Before you return here on Monday ask Maud to be your wife.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” said George fiercely. “How can I propose to one girl, when I love another?”

“Maud Ellis adores you, George.”

“I know she does: it seems conceited to say so, but I am quite aware of her adoration. And I don’t like it. She is rich and handsome and all the rest of it, and a marriage with her means my getting on in the office. All the same, I—I—I——” he hesitated, then finished his sentence with a rush, “I love Lesbia, so there is no more to be said.”

Mrs. Walker removed her hand and glided to the door again, her cold self. “I quite agree with you,” she said, exasperatingly cool. “However, you know my determination. Act as you please.”

“And affection?” called out George as she opened the door.

“Must give way to common sense.”

When alone, the young man dropped into a chair and looked moodily at the disordered dinner-table. He was very much to be pitied for having such a mother. Of a warm affectionate nature, George hungered for some object upon which to expend his love. Mrs. Walker had always been a granite image, unapproachable and chill. No doubt she was fond of her handsome son in her own cold way, but she had never given him the maternal love he craved for. It was small wonder that the boy had gone afield to find some

satisfaction for his craving. Lesbia supplied the want, and on her side found the same joy as her lover in their mutual affection. Mr. Hale in his way was as cold and repellent to her as Mrs. Walker was to her son. Yet these two people, not giving the longed-for love themselves to their children, were trying to rob hungry hearts of spiritual sustenance—a dog-in-a-manger attitude which did not commend itself to George.

He felt that he and Lesbia were severely alone, conscious only of each other and environed by mysteries, which neither could understand. Mr. Hale could explain, and so could Mrs. Walker, but no explanation was volunteered, and George did not know where to look for an elucidation of their several attitudes. Mrs. Walker certainly professed herself ignorant of the amethyst cross mystery, and apparently spoke truly, as her dislike to the match with Lesbia appeared to be wholly based upon her hatred of Walter Hale. And that hatred had to do with Hale's past, of which George knew as little as he did of the past of his mother. But Hale knew something about the cross, which accounted for his extraordinary behaviour, although he declared he did not know who had stolen it. George was also greatly perplexed to know who had taken him to the Marlow cottage while he was insensible. Sitting in the chair with his eyes on the ground, he frowningly perplexed himself with these problems. It was all of no use, so he brushed aside the troubles and, after changing his evening dress, for boating flannels, went to the river. He hoped by exercise to rid himself of these phantoms, so indistinct and yet so real.

Having launched his boat and settled to work, George spun down the stream, the current and his own efforts carrying him along with what appeared to be lightning speed. The attention required in looking after the slight craft prevented his thinking of his mysterious troubles, and his spirits began to rise. At Henley lock his course was stayed, for as he swung into the gates he became aware that another boat was in the lock, and that Tim occupied that same strange shallop.

The two men recognised one another at once,

and a very natural question leaped to Walker's lips.

"Lesbia?" he gasped.

"Thru for ye," grumbled Tim, who looked more misshapen than ever in the dim light. "It's from the young mistress I come. Whist now, sor, an' let me clear out av this divil of a place."

George backed his boat out of the lock, and Tim, muttering under his breath, followed closely. Then the little man paddled his clumsy craft into the near bank, and beckoned George to come also. In a few minutes the two boats were amongst the rustling sedges side by side, and Walker waited breathlessly for Tim to speak.

The sky was filling with shadows, but there was sufficient light for George to see that Tim looked both sorrowful and worried. The sight of the dwarf's sad face revived his terrors.

"Lesbia," cried George again, and gripped Tim's arm fiercely. "She is well?"

"Well in body but sick of heart," said Tim dismally. "Augh, the poor mistress, and how can she be well wid the divil's divarsions bein' played round her?"

"I have tried to see her——"

"Divil a doubt of it, sor. And ye've sint letthers likewise."

"She never answered," breathed George sadly.

"An' how cud she whin she nivr resaved thim same? Answer me that now, sor."

George sat bolt upright in his boat. "Never got my letters! Then how——"

"Ah, be aisy now, me dear young masther," pleaded Tim, and took a tiny note from his pocket. "This was all the mistress cud write, being watched like a mouse, an' by a cat too, divil take the slut."

George scarcely heard what Tim was saying. He was devouring two or three lines of Lesbia's dear writing, which stated that she would always be true to him, and that Tim would reveal all.

"Reveal what?" cried the young man, kissing the letter before transcribing it to his pocket.

"The divil's divarsions," grumbled Tim. "Write an answer, sor."

"I have no pencil, no paper," said George in dismay. "But tell me exactly what has occurred, Tim, and then I'll see what can be done."

Tim nodded. "Sure, it's dying for you she is, me dear sor. The masther wants her to marry the captain, bad luck to his sowl!"

"I know that, but——"

"Howld yer whist, sor," growled the little man, flinging up his long arm. "I have mighty little time to spake. The masther doesn't trust me, forby he knows I wish to see me dear mistress happy wid you, sor, so he's got a she-divil in the house Mrs. Petty by name, who kapes a watch inside. Thin there's Captain Sargent's man. The Shadow they call him for his thin looks, though Canning is his name, bad luck to it. He watches outside, an' whin your boat comes in sight he passes the worrd to Mrs. Petty an' she—may the father av lies fly away wid her—shuts Miss Lesbia in her room."

"But this is tyranny!" cried George, exasperated. "Do you mean to say that Mr. Hale has his daughter watched in this manner?"

"Ay an' I do, and he'll have her watched till she goes to church wid Captain Sargent, or until ye git back that crass. But nivir fear, sor, Miss Lesbia has a fine spirit of her own, and she'll stick to ye through thick an' thin, like the brave young lady she is."

"What's to be done?" asked George, in dismay.

Tim leaned forward. "Write a bit av a letther and sind it to me, Mister Timothy Burke, Rose Cottage, Marlow. Thim two-divils, Mrs. Petty an' The Shadow, to say nothin' av the masther, won't stop that. Thin I'll find means to pass it to the mistress."

"Yes! Yes, Tim. I'll do that. But the tyranny——"

"Whist nqw, for time passes, me dear sor. I heard the masther sayin' that Captain Sargent was going to stay wid Mr. Tait at Hinley. Spake to him, sor, to that same captain."

"But what can I say?" demanded George, more and more perplexed.

"Sor," cried Tim gruffly, "as ye're a man ye can break the head of the divil." And with this advice Tim pushed his boat again into midstream.

CHAPTER VI

PURPLE AND FINE LINEN

MR. MICHAEL TAIT dealt principally in stocks and shares, but was not above any scheme, however wild or however shady, which promised to result in large profits. His motto was: "Make money honestly if you can, but make money!" and he consistently acted up to this advice throughout a long career of speculation. He was not so much a spider sitting in a web to lure unwary flies, as an octopus who stretched out tentacles in every direction to draw victims into his maw. He indulged in dozens of enterprises, both openly and secretly, but all with the aim of making as much cash as possible. That many of these schemes led to much misery, that is, the misery of other people, he never stopped to inquire. And even if he had done so he would have taken no note of the answer. The race was to the swift and the battle to the strong, in Mr. Tait's humble opinion, and those who failed either in fighting or running had to make the best of their plight.

In appearance Michael Tait was a squat, burly, sturdy, man, with sandy hair and whiskers, and a pair of cold blue eyes devoid of all sympathy. He dressed expensively, wore a profusion of jewellery, and was rarely without an excellent cigar sticking out of his mouth. For the sake of luring his victims he cultivated a jolly, free and easy manner, and exhibited an external good nature which deceived many. To quote Tennyson's cutting line, he "snake-like slimed his victim e'er he gorged," and acted the Pharisee by largely advertising his charities. He was looked upon generally as a good fellow, rough, but really kind-hearted, and possessed of a true Christian spirit. As a matter of fact, Mr. Tait knew very little of Christ and His teaching, and would not have subscribed to it, save by word of mouth, had he been aware of its spirit. But he passed as a good man, because he went to church and talked largely of helping the poor.

This prop of British commerce, as he was wrongly described by a too ardent reporter, possessed a regal country house at Henley, where he entertained largely. Also he had chambers in town, but these he only used on rare occasions when business or pleasure prevented him seeking his true home. Mrs. Tait had mercifully passed away many years previously, under the delusion that Michael was a good man, and the Henley mansion was managed by Maud Ellis, who was the stockbroker's niece.

Miss Ellis was a young lady of five-and-twenty, certainly not bad-looking, although she could not be described as beautiful. Like her respectable uncle, she was of the sandy type, but, unlike him, she possessed a tall, full figure, finely shaped. As she always dressed in exquisite taste, and had a personality of the semi-hypnotic kind, she was regarded as a desirable woman. The fact that she was her uncle's heiress also may have had something to do with this opinion. Maud was extremely cunning, and as selfish in her way as Michael was in his. He sought money, she admiration, and they did very well in their efforts to attract both. And it was this clever young woman who had chosen to fall in love with George Walker.

Of course she knew that he was a bad match, that he did not love her, and that as his wife, she would hold no very exalted position. But the fact was that the girl, after playing with various suitors, like the princess of a fairy tale, with no serious intentions had been snared herself. Whether it was Walker's good looks, or his kind heart, or his charm of manner, it is impossible to say; perhaps one of the three, perhaps the three together: but Miss Ellis assuredly was violently in love with the young man. Having arrived at the conclusion that life would be miserable without him, she set to work to make him propose, thinking that she would have small difficulty.

To her surprise, however, George proved to be quite impervious to her sparkling conversation and clever display of her somewhat limited charms. He was polite to her and nothing more, although she made her uncle ask him again and again to the palace at Henley. This conduct piqued Miss Ellis, but did not altogether dis-

please her, as it gave her an opportunity of exercising her talent for intrigue.

From a mere fancy, her passion deepened to ardent love, and she swore mentally that by hook or by crook she would force the young fellow to make her Mrs. Walker. Rarely a week passed without George being asked to Henley, and Maud did her best to subjugate him. But George being in love with Lesbia had a very strong shield to oppose to her love darts, and managed to avoid the amorous pitfalls she spread for him. For six months the chase of this unwilling victim had been going on, and as the quarry always dodged just as the huntress was on the verge of capture, this middle-class Diana concluded that there was another woman in the case. With a view to learning the truth, she watched and made stealthy inquiries, so that she speedily learned of George's infatuation—so she called it—for Lesbia Hale. To detach him from Lesbia became the object of her life, and it was she who suggested to Mr. Hale that Lesbia might profitably marry Captain Alfred Sargent.

As Hale approved of Maud's cleverness, and was frequently indebted to her for getting what he wanted from Tait, he did his best to fall in with her plans, the more so, as he did not care whom his daughter married, provided it was to his interest.

Maud promised, if the marriage was brought about, to interest her uncle in a wild-cat scheme of Hale's contrivance. So the loving father did his best—as has been seen—to force his child into the arms of a man she loathed. George knew nothing of all this intrigue, and kept away from the Henley mansion as much as he could without openly offending his employer. But when he heard from Tim that Captain Sargent was to be a member of the Saturday to Monday house-party, he determined to accept this latest invitation. An interview with Sargent might clear the air of all these mysteries, and George—hating the ex-captain—was not averse from breaking his head as Tim had advised, if there was no other way of releasing Lesbia. Also George fancied that Mr. Hale—a frequent visitor—might be enjoying Mr. Tait's hospitality, in which

case he could speak to him and remonstrate about this tyranny to which Lesbia was subjected.

When George arrived in time for afternoon tea on Saturday, he found that his own hopes and those of Tim were realised—that is, both Walter Hale and Captain Sargent were present. Hale looked as lean and grim and smart as ever, while greeting the flushed young man with the air of a perfect stranger. Maud, who presided at a dainty tea-table, saw that flush, and from the juxtaposition of Hale guessed its reason. She was therefore none too pleased, but veiling her annoyance with a sweet smile, she called the new arrival over to her side, and poured him out a cup of tea.

"You are quite a stranger, Mr. Walker," she said graciously, devouring him with her cold grey eyes, which only lighted up when they rested on his face.

"I was here three weeks ago," said George politely, and accepting cake. "It would rather bore Mr. Tait if I came here oftener."

"It would never bore me," breathed Miss Ellis, "and my uncle is always very glad to see you. He looks upon you almost as his son."

George flushed again and looked awkward. "It is very kind of Mr. Tait," he remarked coldly, "seeing that I am only a clerk in his office."

"Uncle was only a clerk once," said Maud, smiling. "And look what he is now, Mr. Walker. Some day you will be like him."

"I don't think so," said George, looking across to the stout, ungraceful form of the successful stockbroker, who was being waited upon hand and foot by two society ladies of the smart set, anxious to secure tips.

Maud took his remark in its wrong sense. "Oh, you must hope," she declared playfully. "With influence," she spoke meaningly, "you will do much."

"I have no influence," returned the young man coldly.

"That is your own fault," retorted Miss Ellis. "The tide of fortune is flowing past your door, and you will not launch your boat."

"I am waiting for a passenger," said Walker, thinking of Lesbia.

Jealous and cunning as she was Maud was quite taken in for the moment, and smiled graciously. She

fancied that he referred to her. "You need not wait long," she hinted.

George found the situation intolerable, and on the spur of the moment, although it was neither the time nor the place to be confidential, he spoke out. There should be no further misunderstandings if he could help it. "My waiting depends upon Mr. Hale," he said bluntly.

Maud bit her thin lip, and leaned back, with an artificial laugh. Inwardly she was furious, as she now knew that his remark had referred to "that girl," as she contemptuously called Lesbia. But she was too much the woman of the world to reveal her feelings and, moreover, utilised his observation to learn as much of the truth as possible.

"Ah," she said archly, "a little bird told me that Mr. Hale has a beautiful daughter. But I understood that she was engaged to Captain Sargent."

"She is engaged to me," flashed out George, quite forgetting that he was speaking to a jealous woman.

"Ah!" said Miss Ellis again, controlling her countenance with difficulty; "the course of true love is not running smoothly. Poor Mr. Walker, I must help you to gain your wife."

"You!" blurted out George like a fool.

Maud sat up and erected her crest like a snake. "Yes, I," she said haughtily, anxious only for the moment to save her womanly pride. "Why should I not help a friend? I look on you almost as a brother."

Still like a fool, George believed her, and indeed her indignant manner would have deceived a much cleverer man. He was very young and very green, and in Maud's designing hands could be moulded like wax.

She could have struck him in the face for the insult he had offered her, but, hiding her rage under a friendly smile, she laid her plans to entrap him beyond hope of escape. "I shall get Mr. Hale to bring his daughter here," she said quietly, "and then you can talk to her at your leisure."

"Oh, how good you are!" cried George delightedly. "I am sure you will love Lesbia: she is so beautiful and charming—as you are," he added with an after-thought.

Again the impulse came to Maud to strike him, and again her worldly training came to her aid. "Hush!" she said softly, "you will make Captain Sargent jealous. I believe he overheard."

"I don't care if he did," said Walker defiantly.

"Then I do," retorted Miss Ellis, who could not resist paying him out a trifle, much as she loved him. "I don't want you to quarrel here. Now go and talk to Captain Sargent while I receive these new people."

Several ladies and two gentlemen entered at the moment, and she went forward to greet them, followed by her uncle. George left the chair he had occupied near the tea-table and strolled across the room—not to Sargent, but to interview Mr. Hale.

That gentleman saw him coming, and moved away from the person to whom he was speaking, in order to find a scheduled corner. He saw that his would-be son-in-law was coming to converse with him, and, guessing the subject of his conversation, wished to settle the matter without scandal. George, as he surmised, was too frank to be diplomatic, and if within the hearing of others, might say too much. But he need not have been afraid. George, having been schooled in social usages by his mother, was perfectly capable of acting as a well-bred man.

"I have called twice or thrice to see Lesbia," said George, sinking his voice to a judicious whisper, "but I have not been successful."

"That is as it should be," rejoined Mr. Hale coldly. "I do not wish her to see you, and I have taken steps to prevent her from seeing you."

It was on George's tongue to say that he knew what precautions had been taken, but to speak openly would lead to the betrayal of Tim, which was not to be thought of. However, he was as blunt as he dared to be. "It is tyranny to keep a young girl shut up," he snapped angrily.

"You are the cause of her seclusion," retorted the elder man, "and as her father I have a right to act as I please."

"There are law and order in this country," said Walker heatedly, and would have continued to speak with vehemence, but Hale prevented him.

"You are right, and I take advantage of such law and order to prevent my daughter from marrying a man I disapprove of."

"Why do you object to me?"

"We discussed that before and I gave you my answer. Also, if you will remember, I gave you a chance of having things your own way. It is my desire that Lesbia should marry my friend Sargent, but if you will recover that lost cross for me, I will permit her marriage with you."

"I can't find the cross," growled George sullenly.

"Then you can't marry Lesbia," replied Hale, very distinctly, "and as you are forcing me to curtail Lesbia's liberty by haunting the house, I must ask you, in her interests, if not in mine, to discontinue your persecution."

George looked at the cold, grim face before him, very straightly. "I love Lesbia, and I intend to marry Lesbia," he said quietly. "Therefore I shall do all in my power to see Lesbia. As to Captain Sargent——"

"Hullo!" remarked that gentleman, who was strolling—perhaps purposely—within earshot. "What about Captain Sargent?"

He was a slim, thin, delicate-looking man of the mutton-dressed-as-lamb, type that is, he did not look his age, and affected a pronounced juvenile fashion, a trifle over-done. His collars were too high, his ties were too brilliant, his clothes were aggressively new. To look at his array he might just have left an army crammer's, and had apparently stopped short at "the young lieutenant" epoch, which is the era of the male peacock. As to his looks, these were of the colourless, faded type; his face was pale, his eyes were pale, and his hair—what there was of it—was also pale. In fact, Sargent looked like a sheet of paper prepared for sketching, and could have painted upon the background of himself any character he wished to represent, provided it was not a strong one. The contrast between his washed-out personality and young Walker's vivid virility was most marked.

"What about Captain Sargent?" repeated this product of civilisation, a trifle more aggressively since George hesitated to speak. "Finish what you have to say, Mr. Walker."

"Certainly," replied the younger man coolly. "I am the more willing, as Mr. Hale is present. In a word, Captain Sargent, I love Miss Lesbia Hale, and I intend to marry her. You wish to make her your wife, and I do not intend to let you have your way."

"All that in a word," sneered the captain, with a disagreeable look in his pale grey eyes.

"Yes. In a word to the wise."

"And suppose I am not wise?"

"It matters very little to me if you are wise or not," retorted George, who was not to be put down by sneers.

"Lesbia is to marry me, so that is all about it."

Sargent glanced at Mr. Hale, who was quite unruffled.

"I presume her father's wish counts for something?"

"Not when it conflicts with her happiness."

"What do you say, Hale?"

"I have said all that I intend to say. Walker knows my views."

"He does," broke in George, "and he does not subscribe to them. I give you warning that I intend to marry Lesbia. As to you, sir," he turned so fiercely on Sargent that the man gave back a step, "if you make Lesbia unhappy or bother her in any way I shall make myself very unpleasant."

"Dear me!" sneered the captain in feigned alarm. "What a terrible Turk."

George stared coldly at his rival, and deliberately turned on his heel without speaking further. He had declared open war, and he was pleased that he had done so. Now—with a clear conscience—he could haunt the Marlow cottage and see Lesbia and woo Lesbia and carry off Lesbia, without feeling that he was acting otherwise than as a gentleman and an ardent lover. "Damn the fellow!" breathed Sargent, who had reddened under Walker's contemptuous gaze. "What's to be done, Hale?"

"Nothing," rejoined that gentleman sternly. "if you find that cross, you can marry Lesbia; if Walker finds it, he can make her his wife."

It was a pity that George did not overhear this speech. He would have been interested to hear that Sargent also was seeking for the mysterious ornament to which Hale appeared to attach such value. The

captain looked at his friend curiously. "Why do you want this cross so much?" he asked.

"That's my business. What you have to do is to find it." And in his turn Mr. Hale went away, leaving Sargent caressing his moustache in some perplexity.

Presently, everyone went to dinner, which was a banquet delicately cooked and splendidly served. Tait was quite devoted to the pleasures of the table, and paid his chef a large salary. The food was perfect and the wines flowed freely, so that by the time the guests repaired to the drawing-room, everyone was in the best of spirits. The house-party was a large one as there were about twenty people present, and not one of these would have been acceptable in a Sunday school. There were ladies belonging to the smart set, perfectly respectable from a worldly point of view, but who cared for nothing save bridge and dress, flirtation and pleasure. There were also men, some with titles, and many with brains of the speculative money-making order.

Tait was not entirely in society, but by reason of his wealth and public position as a philanthropist hovered on the fringe of it. He helped social butterflies to make money on the Stock Exchange, lent sums large and small to ladies who could advance him in Mayfair and Belgravian circles, and was always open to consider any scheme which promised to bring in cash. Thus his house-parties were composed of a heterogeneous mass of people, good or bad, titled and untitled, gay and grave. But a general air of restlessness prevailed, and in that splendid mansion one and all appeared to dance along a golden road, which doubtless led to the Pit, and were personally conducted by the cunning, self-indulgent, wordly old stockbroker who might have passed as Mammon in the flesh.

After dinner, the party split up into sections. Some ardent gamblers sat down to bridge; a few restless spirits went to dance, and a group gathered round a young man at the piano who sang the latest comic songs.

There was plenty of champagne, together with cigars and cigarettes of the best, so the fun waxed fast and furious as the hours grew on to midnight everyone grew more or less excited. Within bounds, of course,

as Maud Ellis was too clever to permit the Henley palace to earn a name for Neronian extravagance. The entertainment just paused on the verge of an orgy ; but under Maud's skilful management did not overstep the mark.

That young lady had been watching George all the night, although she did not speak to him again. Towards twelve o'clock, she found herself near him, and rallied him on his pensive air. "Don Quixote in love," she said in an airy manner.

Then she lowered her voice impressively. "Meet me in the picture-gallery at three o'clock," she said, "for Lesbia's sake."

CHAPTER VII

AFTER MIDNIGHT

HAD George been more of a man of the world he would have wholly mistrusted Maud Ellis, and would have declined her invitation to meet him in the picture-gallery in the small hours of Sunday morning. It would not have been credited by a judge of human nature that one woman would make such an appointment with the man she loved to plead the cause of her rival, or to give a helping hand to bring about a marriage which was dead against the feelings of her heart. But George, in spite of his years and virile looks, was an unsophisticated man, who could not guess what was below the surface. He was a kind of society tenderfoot, and perhaps this in some measure constituted his charm in the eyes of Miss Ellis, who had experience enough to fit out a dozen men and at least two women. At all events, though he wondered that her liking for him—as he termed it—had lapsed so suddenly, yet he determined to keep the appointment and to listen to any scheme which she might propose, likely to accomplish the marriage with Lesbia. In this way are strong men twisted to feminine purposes by women, and from Samson downwards no man has been sufficiently cunning to get the better of his Delilah. There was therefore some excuse for George.

His attention was drawn from his own thoughts by a lively discussion going on between Mr. Tait and three or four ladies, with a sprinkling of men. As it was now long after midnight some people had retired to bed, and others were preparing to follow. But Tait was a night bird who liked to stay up as long as possible—probably because, as a robber of widows and orphans, his pillow must have had its thorns. To entertain those guests who remained wakeful, and especially the feminine portion thereof, he mentioned that he had lately come into possession of some wonderful jewels which a famous, or rather infamous, *demi-mondaine* of Paris had sold. Of course, the ladies were more than anxious to see these gems, both on account of their beauty and value and because of the celebrity of their former owner. They one and all clamoured for a sight of them, and as Mr. Tait had purposely stimulated their curiosity to keep them from retiring, he was not unwilling to gratify their wish. He therefore led the way to the picture-gallery, and pointed out a small narrow door at the end of it.

"There is my safe," he said proudly, "or rather my strong-room."

"Queer place for a safe," drawled Sargent, with a shrug.

"And for that reason the safer. We are all friends here," Tait glanced round graciously, and looked more like a Silenus than ever, "so I do not mind revealing the whereabouts of twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewels. But no thief would dream that my safe was here. And even if he did," added the stockbroker, drawing out his watch-chain, "the safe cannot be opened save by this key."

"But it might be broken open," George ventured to remark.

Tait laughed in a jolly manner. "It would take the cleverest thief in London to break into my safe, and there are only two keys to open it. I have one on my watch-chain, and Maud, my niece, has the other."

The guests looked at one another. Had not Tait been flushed with wine and excitement he would not have been thus free in his speech, and he was not a man who talked large as a rule. But the lateness of

the hour, the presence of many people, the lights, the music, the gambling, the wine, and the chatter had loosened his usually cautious tongue. Maud frowned when her uncle spoke so rashly, as she thought that he was a fool to do so. Certainly there was no one present who would have broken open the safe, since everyone was respectable, even if—as the word goes—rackety! All the same, the revelation of the whereabouts of the safe and the information so guilelessly supplied was risky, to say the least of it. Miss Ellis shook her head at her venturesome uncle.

“Don’t say too much,” she remarked in a low voice. “Even this safe may not be strong enough to withstand a burglar of the new school.”

“Well, I don’t care,” cried the stockbroker recklessly, inserting his key into the lock, “my jewels are insured. Come, ladies, you can all feast your eyes, and—as I have bought the gems to sell them again—I am open to an offer.”

He said this jokingly, yet meant to sell if he could. Some of the guests drew back rather annoyed, as they thought that Mr. Tait was going too far in importing City manners into his house-party. Maud, ever watchful, again whispered to her uncle, but he shook her off, and entered the strong-room—now open—to bring out the jewels. When the box which contained them was placed on a near table, and the contents were displayed, all thought of Tait’s bad manners disappeared in amazement and delight at the sight of the precious stones.

These were truly beautiful. Many were set in tiaras, bracelets, rings, chains, locketts and in various ornaments for the hair and corsage. But other stones lay loose and glittering, to be arranged and used as required. There were diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds and many inferior gems, the whole forming a dazzling heap, which made every mouth water with avarice. But for Tait’s estimate, those present—and some were good judges of jewels—would have deemed the radiant pile worth twice the amount mentioned.

“Try them on, ladies,” said the genial stockbroker. “Try them on. We are all friends here!” and he placed a tiara on the head of his niece, who stood near with a frown on her face. She began to think that her

uncle was crazy to display his wealth in this reckless manner.

In a few moments some of the female guests were glittering with jewels, and surveying themselves delightedly in hand-mirrors which had been brought by Tait's order. The stockbroker himself, with a cynical smile, looked at their avaricious faces, and listened with sneering pleasure to the delighted little screams which they gave at intervals.

Jewels have a much greater effect on women than on men, and there was not a woman present but would have gone great lengths for the sake of possessing even one of the ornaments. Gretchen was not the only woman who could be lured by the glitter of gems, which is so much superior to the mere gleam of gold. And Tait, amidst his splendour, looked more like Mammon than ever.

But this early-hours-of-the-morning pleasure came to an end in fifteen minutes, and the ladies, taking off the jewels, restored them to their owner. Tait was really glad to get them back, and counted them carefully, for the look in the eyes of some of the ladies actually frightened him, and he half thought that they would run away with the treasures. However, he made sure that every one of the ornaments had been given back, and replaced them in the box, which he deposited in the safe. After that, the guests went to bed, and the gallery, with the strong-room carefully locked, was left in silence and darkness. But the sleep of many was disturbed by the thought of that Nibelung's treasure, so near at hand, and yet so impossible to obtain.

George was indifferent to the gems, as he thought that Lesbia's eyes were brighter and much more beautiful. He left the gallery while Tait was displaying his hoard, and retired to the very comfortable bedroom which Maud's care had provided. As a mere clerk he should not have had such luxurious surroundings, or, indeed, have been in the splendid house at all; but she loved him, and could not do enough for him. Therefore, George was housed like a king, and, after the manner of youth, took his comforts easily. It never occurred to him that in his humble position he had no right to be pampered and petted. By right of good

looks and delighted manners, he had hitherto gone through the world very much spoiled by the fair sex. He therefore took everything as his right.

While waiting for three to strike from the stable clock—it was now two—he seated himself before the fire and, lighting a pipe, gave himself up to dreams of Lesbia. In one way or another he was determined to make her his wife, but it was difficult to see how he proposed to keep her on his small salary, particularly when much of that same salary was required to support his mother.

But that George indulged in the rosy dreams of youth and had such a profound belief in the kindness of fortune, he would have dismissed his proposed marriage as an impossibility. Hale was against it, and so was Sargent : his mother did not approve of the marriage, and there was Maud Ellis to be considered. A more hopeful man may well have been despondent : but not George. He felt sure that everything would come right, and that life was a fairy-tale in which the fated prince—who was himself—carried off the lovely princess—who, of course, was Lesbia. And she was in an enchanted castle—so he glorified Rose Cottage—watched by two dragons, Canning and Mrs. Petty—but helped also by a faithful dwarf, by name Tim Burke. Finally, there was Mr. Hale as the wicked magician to be reckoned with, and perhaps Maud might act as the malignant fairy ; but somehow the marriage would be brought about, and in some way sufficient money would be provided, so that the prince and princess could live happily ever afterwards.

Lesbia would not have thought in this comfortable fashion in the face of such obstacles as barred the way to the altar : but then she was much more practical than her lover in spite of the fact that she dwelt in seclusion, while he battled in the workaday world.

And then, as George fondly imagined he had discovered a few hours previously, Maud Ellis was not the wicked fairy after all. Rather was she about to play the agreeable part of the fairy godmother, and bring together two lovers parted by adverse circumstances.

When Maud afterwards thought of the trust George

placed in her she wondered at his folly, and had a contempt for his upright character that could estimate human nature so highly. But George never doubted for one moment but that the appointment was made in all good faith and for the express purpose of helping his suit with Lesbia. He therefore waited impatiently for the striking of the clock. Only once did it cross his mind as odd that Maud should choose that hour and that meeting-place to forward his interests, since she could easily have spoken to him in a convenient place and at a becoming hour in the morning. But he brushed the thought aside as unworthy of her kind heart, and when the hour of three chimed out, he opened the door softly and slipped out to keep his appointment.

George had stayed so frequently at the Henley mansion that he knew his way to the picture-gallery exceedingly well. Also, it was Mr. Tait's hobby to have the corridors and many of the rooms lighted in a subdued manner all night. It prevented burglary, he declared and certainly the sight of an illuminated house would daunt those who might prefer to work in darkness or only by the light of a bull's-eye.

George, therefore, found himself in a soft glow when he emerged from the bedroom and stole on tiptoe towards the head of the stairs. Here he descended and took his way towards the back of the house to the picture-gallery. This portion of the great mansion was not lighted—which seemed odd, remembering what Mr. Tait said about light scaring burglars, and seeing also that the safe was placed here. But whatever the stockbroker's whim, George found the long gallery in darkness, and as he had entered by a door placed directly in the middle of it, he halted there doubtfully. He could see no light, save what filtered through the skylights, and did not know where Maud waited for him. At the far end of the gallery were double glass doors, leading down steps into the gardens. These were usually shuttered at night, but George noted with some surprise by the gleam of starlight which came through them that on this special night the shutters had not been put up. This was strange, considering the valuables which were concealed in the

safe ; but then, as the young man reflected, it was also strange that Tait should place his treasure-house at the other end of the gimcrack gallery, which could be so easily broken into. But, after all, on the authority of Poe's tale of the "Purloined Letter," the more unlikely a place in which valuables are hidden the safer they are. Not one of the London fraternity of thieves would believe that the wary stockbroker would be so foolish as to place his safe, or strong-room, or treasure-house, or whatever he liked to call it, in such a locality. Therefore, no creature of the night would come to rob. There was considerable method in Tait's apparent madness after all.

But George had scanty time for such reflections, as the hours were swiftly moving towards dawn, and he yet had to converse with Maud. His eyes grew more accustomed to the semi-darkness of the gallery, and he glanced up and down to see if he could espy the darker of the girl.

At this moment he heard the clink of metal upon metal. The sound came from the direction of the strong-room, and, as he turned his gaze thereto, he suddenly saw a vivid stream of light, proceeding apparently from a bull's-eye. In a flash it struck him that the strong-room was being burgled, and almost without thinking he uttered a loud cry and sprang forward to lay hands on the thieves.

The light disappeared as he raced up, and when within measurable distance of the safe he stumbled over a body motionless on the floor. It was that of a woman, as Walker could tell by the draperies he mechanically clutched in his fall. Before he could pick himself up, two dark forms dashed past him towards the glass doors. George, anxious only to lay hands on the thieves, ran down the gallery at their heels and left the woman where she was. The intruders easily opened the double doors, which evidently had been left ajar. George followed, and saw two men race across the lawn and into the belt of trees which girdled Mr. Tait's mansion. As he increased his speed he shouted loudly for assistance.

By-and-by, lights were seen moving in the upper windows of the great house, and into the corridors

poured many guests and servants, all in various stages of undress, and all scared by the midnight alarm. Tait, with a dressing-gown thrown hastily over his burly form, pushed his way through the throng down the stairs, and the guests streamed after him. Everyone knew what was the matter, for a wakeful servant had heard the shout of "Thieves!" and the ominous word had hastily passed from lip to lip.

"I expect my jewels are gone!" panted Tait, waddling towards the gallery at the head of a picturesque mob.

In a second the electric lights were switched on—the gallery blazed with light. Tait uttered a cry of alarm, which was echoed by those behind him, and there was cause for surprise. The door of the strong-room stood wide open, and some distance away lay the insensible body of Maud Ellis, dressed in the attire she had worn the previous evening. While some of the ladies attended to the girl, Tait with surprising agility plunged into the strong-room and then they heard him bellow bull-like in mingled rage and astonishment. A moment later he emerged.

"The jewels are gone! the jewels are gone!" he shouted, purple with wrath. "Here, some of you, go to Henlcy for the police; search the grounds, examine the house, and you——"

"The doors are open, sir," cried a footman.

"The thieves must have escaped. After them! after them!" bellowed Tait, in a frenzy of rage.

"Your niece, man, your niece!" said a gentleman who was supporting the unconscious Miss Ellis; but Tait only swore the more.

"Confound my niece! I have lost twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewels."

Several people looked disgusted at this callousness. A young doctor, who was stopping in the house, and who was feeling Maud's pulse, looked up. "Miss Ellis has been chloroformed," he remarked quietly.

Tait bent down and lightly touched the gold chain which was round the girl's neck. "The key of the strong-room is gone," he cried furiously.

"No doubt," explained the medical man, "Miss

Ellis has been rendered insensible, and then robbed of the key. But who——”

“How did Maud come to be here at this hour?” demanded Tait savagely. “Go for the police, some of you,” he shouted, stamping furiously. “I’m not going to lose a fortune in this way.”

“It’s useless; the thieves have escaped,” cried a voice at the end of the gallery, and George bounded in at the open door.

“Walker,” cried the stockbroker, recoiling, “what are you doing here? What do you know about this?”

“I came downstairs and heard the thieves at work,” explained George quickly. “I tried to lay hands on them, but tumbled over the body of a woman on the floor, and——”

“It is Miss Ellis,” said the young doctor, looking up. “Do you know how she came to be here?”

George hesitated. He could not—for the sake of Maud’s reputation—say that she had appointed a meeting with him, and did not know how to explain.

Tait noted his momentary hesitation, and turned on him furiously. “How do you come to be here?” he demanded. “What makes you wander about my house when everyone is in bed?”

“Ah,” said Mr. Hale, pushing his way through the frightened crowd, “that is very suspicious. Speak out, Walker!”

“I heard a noise and came down,” cried George, making the first excuse which entered his head.

“No one else heard a noise,” remarked Sargent, who was at Tait’s elbow.

“I was wakeful,” retorted Walker sharply; but on every hand he saw incredulous looks, and realised with a chill that he was suspected.

Tait grunted, and looked at the young man with a lowering brow. “Who are the thieves?” he demanded. “How many of them are there?”

“I saw two men, but could not catch a glimpse of their faces. I think they were masked,” said George readily, and again saw disbelief written on the faces around him. “But may I suggest, Mr. Tait, that you send for the police at once. The thieves made for the wood round the house and may escape.”

"I darsay they have escaped," grunted Tait savagely. "The servants are searching the gardens. Meanwhile let us revive Maud, and hear what she has to say."

"She is coming round now," said the doctor; and even as he spoke, Maud opened her eyes in a vague, unseeing way.

"Carry her up to bed," said Tait harshly. "I'll have an inquiry made into this as soon as dawn comes and the police arrive. Meanwhile you can all retire. Mr. Walker, remain here and explain."

"I have explained," said George proudly. "I have nothing more to add."

Tait shook his head doubtfully, and whispers went round, which indicated suspicion of the truth of Walker's explanation. By this time Maud, more or less sensible, was on her feet. Her eyes wandered here and there until they alighted on the young man.

"You!" cried Miss Ellis, with a loud wail. "Oh, George, you!"

CHAPTER VIII

UNDER A CLOUD

THERE was very little sleep for anyone during the remaining hours of darkness, and after breakfast—an unusually dismal meal—the guests one and all showed a desire to get away from their host.

Mr. Tait certainly was not amiable, since he had suffered so great a loss, and growled like a bear with a sore head. Not being a gentleman, he could not control his temper, and made himself so openly disagreeable that everyone wanted to leave forthwith. But until the police had made inquiries, it was impossible for either man or woman to depart without becoming suspected.

Throughout that wretched Sunday the men were miserable and the ladies hysterical. Tait, no longer the jolly Silenus, or even the gracious Mammon, moved amongst his friends with looks of suspicion for all.

The police duly arrived, and searched the gardens

and the house, but in no way could they trace the thieves. George stuck persistently to his story, which, of course, was true, save for the excuse which he gave for coming down the stairs. And it was this false portion—this weak subterfuge—which made Mr. Tait suspicious. He knew that George was hard up, and said as much to him in a quiet corner.

"What has my being a pauper to do with your loss?" demanded Walker, firing up on the instant.

Mr. Tait shook his bullet head and scowled with his little pig eyes. "My jewels are worth twenty thousand pounds," he retorted.

"I don't care if they are worth twenty millions," said George, turning pale, for he realised his employer's meaning. "I know nothing about them."

"You were in the gallery at the time——"

"I came down to the gallery because I heard a noise," interrupted Walker furiously. "I told the police the story I told you. I did my best to catch the thieves, and now you have the audacity to accuse me."

"I don't exactly accuse you——"

"It looks very like it."

"You must admit that your conduct is suspicious," protested the stockbroker.

"I admit nothing of the sort."

"People don't wander about a house after everyone is in bed, without a reason," snapped Tait, with a searching glance.

George bore the scrutiny without flinching. "I have explained how I came to be wandering about," he declared proudly. "I was sitting by my fire, and on hearing a suspicious noise I came down, with what result you know. How dare you accuse me!"

"I tell you again that I don't accuse you," vociferated Tait crossly. "But you have acted foolishly, to say the least of it."

"How else could I have acted?"

"On hearing the noise you should have aroused me."

"Had I done so I should not have been in time to see the thieves."

"What good did you do by seeing them, since they have escaped? That is," added Tait slowly, "if there

were two men. Stop!" He threw up his fat hand as the young man was about to speak angrily. "It is no use going round the bush. You may be innocent or you may not be. Your story may be true or it may be the reverse."

"Mr. Tait"—George held his temper under by mere force of will—"why should I rob you?"

The stockbroker opened his pig's eyes. "Why!" he demanded in amazement, "do I not know that you are desperately poor? Didn't Hale tell me only the other day that you wanted to marry his daughter, and could not do so for want of money? Oh, there are plenty of reasons why you should take twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewels. They can be unset and sold, in which case they will be difficult to trace. Had they been bank-notes, I don't believe that this burglary—so-called—would have taken place."

George curled his lip. "You put things very clearly sir," he said quietly, "and on the face of it, I admit that my conduct looks a trifle suspicious."

"A trifle!" cried Tait scornfully. "Very good indeed. A trifle! Why not admit that you came down to steal the jewels, and went out to bury them in some safe place, returning, when the alarm was given, to tell us this cock-and-bull story of two thieves?"

George winced and grew white at this very plain speaking. But he kept his temper, for to have lost it at the moment would have been dangerous. He saw very well that he was in a tight place.

"I ask you only one question, Mr. Tait," he said calmly. "Who gave the alarm?"

"I do not know," said the stockbroker sullenly. "I heard a cry of thieves, and help, and blue murder, and came down to find everyone else aroused."

"Then I may tell you that I gave the alarm sir."

"You say so," sneered the other.

"I say so because it is true," rejoined Walker, throwing back his head indignantly. "I shouted in the gallery when I saw the light, and I cried out again when I followed the thieves. I lost them when they bolted into the wood girdling this place. Now, I ask you, sir, should I have given the alarm had I been guilty?"

"No—if you gave the alarm, that is. But I don't believe you did."

"In other words, you think that I am guilty."

"Upon my word, Walker, it looks very much like it."

"Then why not hand me over to the police?"

The stockbroker moved uneasily and wiped his damp, red face. "Your mother is an old friend of mine," he said hesitatingly; "I think of her."

"That is very good of you," said the ungrateful George; "but I would rather you believed in my innocence. I have no wish to hide myself behind any woman's petticoats."

"Not even behind Maud's?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said George stolidly, determined to hold his peace about the lady even to her uncle. "Miss Ellis and I are very good friends, nothing more."

"You know that she loves you. I should never have asked a mere clerk from my office here, but that she loved you. I disapproved of her infatuation, but I gave in to her since I am your mother's friend."

"You are slightly incoherent, sir, and entirely wrong. Miss Ellis and I are friends; nothing more. And to return to the subject of the burglary, may I remind you that the police have discovered that the safe was not broken into, but that the door was opened with a key? The key, I notice, is still on your watch-chain. How then could I have opened the safe?"

"Perhaps you think that I stole the jewels myself?" sneered Tait coolly. "I may remind you, in my turn, that Maud also has a key."

George sprang to his feet and clenched his hand "You dare to insinuate that I got it from Miss Ellis and——"

The door opened as he spoke, and Tait, who was facing it, glanced over the young man's shoulder. "Here is Maud herself. Perhaps she will explain."

It was indeed Miss Ellis, looking very white and pinched. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her mouth was drooping, and she confessed to a headache, which was not to be wondered at, seeing what she had gone through.

"That chloroform is horrible stuff," complained Maud, sinking into a chair.

"Have you seen the inspector?" said Tait, giving his niece very little sympathy for her wan looks.

"Yes; I have told him all I know."

"Perhaps you will repeat what you have told him to your uncle, Miss Ellis," remarked Walker, still standing very stiff and very proudly. "He has accused me of getting the key from you to rob the strong-room, and swears that I have buried the jewels somewhere in the garden."

"That is absurd," said Maud, looking at her uncle, while a red spot of colour burned on either pale cheek. "I don't believe that you have anything to do with the matter."

"Then what did you mean by addressing Walker as you did, when you revived in the gallery?" demanded Mr. Tait sharply.

"I simply said, 'Oh, George, you!'" said the girl quietly; "and that because I felt glad he was there to help me."

"He didn't help you in the least," remarked Tait grimly.

"He would have done so had I asked him," she retorted. "Would you not, Mr. Walker?"

"Certainly."

"It's not George this time, then," muttered the stockbroker. "Well, Maud, perhaps you will tell me what you were doing in the gallery."

Maud's eyes sought those of the man she loved, but she replied without hesitation: "I'll tell you what I did not tell the police, uncle. The inspector believes that I came down because I heard a noise."

"Like Walker here."

"He did not come down for that reason."

Tait looked at George with triumph in his eyes. "I thought not," he said.

"If he said that he did, he said so to shield me," pursued Miss Ellis, and looked gratefully at the confused young man.

"What do you mean by that, Maud?" asked Tait tartly.

"I made an appointment with George in the picture-

gallery at three in the morning, as I wished to help him to marry Lesbia Hale."

"Why, I thought you loved Walker yourself!" cried the astonished stockbroker.

"So I did—so I do," breathed Miss Elliss, drooping her sandy head. "But, to my mind, love means sacrifice. George—for I have the right to call him so now—George would not have been happy with me, as he loved Lesbia Hale, so I arranged to give him up to her, and to make things right with her father. For that reason I waited for him in the gallery. There I was suddenly pounced upon, and a handkerchief soaked in chloroform was clapped over my mouth. I daresay the person who did it stole the key from the chain round my neck, and opened the strong-room to steal the jewels. But I knew nothing from the moment I became insensible until I revived to find you all standing round me. That is the story I have told the inspector, save that I kept quiet my appointment with George."

"Then you believe him to be innocent?" said the stockbroker, confounded by the frankness of this story.

Maud rose indignantly. "The man I love can never be guilty," she cried.

George blushed a rosy red. He saw that he had not behaved overwell to this brave girl, who had so cleverly exonerated him, although he really had no reason to accuse himself of duplicity towards her. But in a confused way he felt that she was heaping coals of fire on his head, and was more drawn to her than he had ever been before. Here, indeed, was a friend worth having. With Lesbia as his wife and Maud as his friend, life would indeed be joyous.

In his innocence it never struck the young man that no male can drive, either in double harness or in tandem fashion, two women who both love him. He thought that Maud, having discovered that the true meaning of love was sacrifice, behaved thus because of her newly-acquired knowledge. "Thank you, Miss Ellis," he said simply, but his looks implied volumes more.

Tait was displeased. He had no grudge against George, whom he liked well enough; but he did not like his solution of the mystery to be thus upset.

"You mean well, Maud," he said at length, "and you have shielded Walker very cleverly. All the same, I cannot accept your explanation."

Miss Ellis rose in alarm. "Uncle, do you mean that you will have Mr. Walker arrested when you know that he is innocent?"

"For his mother's sake I shall not do that," said the elder man; "but if Mr. Walker will give back the jewels I will not dismiss him from my office."

"I have no jewels to give," cried George recklessly, and his face flushed a deep red. "As to remaining in your office, do you think that I would continue to serve a man who suspects me of such a wicked crime? I shall never return to your office, Mr. Tait, nor shall I re-enter your house until my innocence is made clear. If the police arrest me——"

"They will not do that," interrupted Maud quickly, "I promise you; there is no evidence against you. I don't know who chloroformed me, but you are innocent, I swear. My uncle will take no steps."

"For Mrs. Walker's sake," interpolated the stock-broker unctuously.

"So you can leave this house when you will," continued Maud, "knowing"—she seized his hand—"that I, at least, believe you guiltless."

"Thank you!" said George, and kissed her hand. "Mr. Tait, if you and the police want me, you know where to find me." And he stalked out of the room with his head in the air. Maud Ellis looked after him with hungry looks, and heaved a deep sigh when the door closed.

Within the hour George had asked permission of the inspector to leave the house, and obtained it. Whatever the guests believed, the police apparently—thanks to Maud's report—accepted him as a wholly guiltless person. He gave his address to the officer so that he might be called as a witness in the event of the thieves being brought to book, and then shook the dust of that splendid Henley mansion from his feet.

He was glad to get away, for several people eyed him askance, and evidently there was an uneasy feeling that he knew more than he would confess. But no one hinted openly that he was concerned in the

robbery. It was merely thought that his presence in the gallery required a more reasonable explanation than the weak one of having heard a noise. Still, George could not help feeling that he was suspected by the guests and servants, and it was gall and worm-wood to the proud young man that this should be the case.

Walker carried his portmanteau down to the river, as he had rowed up to Henley from Medmenham. It was now late in the afternoon, and with a heavy heart he prepared to launch his boat and return.

The news that he had to take to his mother was unwelcome, and he wondered how she would receive the information that he had left Tait's office. Mrs. Walker's circumstances were very desperate, as her income was so small, and she greatly depended upon her son's earnings. The present phase of things would be worse than ever, and George winced as he contemplated the coming interview.

Just as he was about to step into the boat, Mr. Hale, cigar in mouth, sauntered up and addressed him. Walker was in no mood for conversation, and would have pushed off with a curt nod, but that the elder man uttered a sentence which made him pause indignantly. "So Tait didn't have you arrested, Walker," said Mr. Hale cruelly.

George turned pale, and looked straight at the speaker. "If you were not Lesbia's father," he said quietly, "I should fling you into the river for those words."

"I quite believe you would and could," rejoined Hale, looking admiringly at the splendid figure of the young man; "but that will not make you any the more innocent."

"If I were guilty—if Mr. Tait believed me to be guilty, I should have been arrested long since," said Walker with an effort; "the mere fact that I am permitted to leave the house shows that I am considered guiltless."

"Tait was always absurdly good-natured," said Hale coolly.

George looked at him again. "You believe that I stole the jewels?" he asked.

"Of course I do. You made a lame excuse for being in the gallery at night, and evidently went out after two pretended thieves so as to hide your plunder. I didn't believe you had it in you. See what love will do."

"Love?"

"Yes. You are poor; you want to marry Lesbia, and so tried the short cut to wealth. Presently, when things have blown over, you will dig up the jewels and sell them to some fence. Then you will come to me with a cock-and-bull story about a legacy being left to you—perhaps you will inherit that fifty thousand pounds which is waiting for your mother's sister. But, knowing the source of your legacy, I shall say no."

"You have said no already," replied Walker quietly, although he longed to knock this sneering man of the world into the water. "Don't say any more, sir, else I may forget that you are Lesbia's father." And George pushed off into mid-stream.

Hale lingered on the bank, still scoffing. "I shall tell Lesbia everything, Walker," called out Mr. Hale, clearly and slowly. "She will never marry you now, my dear burglar."

The unhappy lover pulled swiftly down stream with those last words ringing in his ears. Could he indeed trust Lesbia to continue her engagement in the face of his being accused of a sordid crime? He knew that she loved him as dearly as he loved her, and would go through fire and water to prove that love. All the same, there was something so mean and contemptible about stealing from a friend's house, that even her great love might not be proof against her father's story. George clenched his teeth and pulled for dear life in order to control his emotion. He could do nothing in the face of all that had taken place, save wait patiently. Trusting in Tait's friendship for his mother and in Maud's loyalty, he knew that he would not be disgraced openly: but the idea that Lesbia might believe him guilty was desperately hard to bear. Still, she loved him, and he trusted in her love. That was all he could do, for a glance around showed him that he was helpless amidst the black circumstances which had suddenly environed him.

Mrs. Walker heard a bald, blunt tale from George, and said very little in reply. Not even when he declared that he had thrown up his situation did she rebuke him. On the contrary she rather applauded.

"As my son," said the stern, cold woman, "you could do nothing else."

"Then you do not believe that I am guilty?"

Mrs. Walker looked at him scornfully. "Our relations as mother and son have never been sentimental," she said quietly, "but you should know me better than to ask me that."

"Thank you, mother," said George simply, for such a speech meant much from the Spartan woman who was usually so reticent.

"I want no thanks for being just," she remarked coldly. "What you have to do is to clear your name by searching for these thieves."

"How am I to do that?"

"I leave it to your own cleverness. Meanwhile I shall see Mr. Jabez, and get him to advance us sufficient to live on until your name is cleared and you have got another situation. As to this girl Lesbia, give her up."

"Never! Never! Never!" said George. His mother looked at him coldly and disapprovingly, and left him in silence.

But matters turned out as she wished. Within three days a tearful note from a distraught girl to her anxious lover—a note of a few words. "I believe you to be innocent, but we can never marry, and we must never meet again," said the note; and it was signed stiffly, "Lesbia Hale."

CHAPTER IX

TWO GIRLS

IF the course of true love did not run smoothly with George, the girl he loved found it speeding roughly also.

Lesbia was as anxious to see her lover as he was to meet her; but parental displeasure and parental authority stood like a wall between this new Pyramus and Thisbe—a wall which could by no means be over-leaped.

As Tim had informed George, his master had engaged Mrs. Petty as a housekeeper, and so the domestic arrangements of Rose Cottage were temporarily removed from the hands of Lesbia. Also, in conjunction with The Shadow, Mrs. Petty acted both as a spy and a gaoler. It was infamous, as Lesbia felt, that she should be watched in this fashion ; but as she had no money and no friends and no place whither she could go, there was nothing left for it but to wait until such time as Mr. Hale became more reasonable.

Mrs. Petty was a stout, plethoric woman, with an aggressive manner and a loud, common voice, who probably had been a Margate lodging house keeper of the worst description. She was a born bully, and within ten minutes of her entry into the house Tim learned to loathe her with all the fevour of an Irishman, impatient of restraint in any form.

Mrs. Petty tried similar tactics and treatment on Lesbia, but was met so firmly and put in her place so quietly, that—being a coward at heart, as all bullies are—she left the girl as severely alone as was possible, while executing Mr. Hale's instructions. These were to keep a strict eye on his daughter, and to prevent the intrusion of George Walker. Mrs. Petty, after severe rebuffs, contented herself by watching from afar, and managed, by always being on the spot when Lesbia least expected her, to fulfil her contemptible duty. For the rest of the time she worried Tim and looked after the domestic economy of the cottage.

The Shadow, as became his nickname, was a less aggressive personage. He was really called John Canning, and formerly had acted as valet to Captain Sargent. But that gentleman, being anxious to marry Lesbia, whom he greatly admired, and hating George as a too-handsome and over-young rival, had suggested to his friend Hale that Canning should act as an in-offensive dragon to keep away the young man. Hale quite approved of this, as Canning could guard the garden, while Mrs. Petty kept watch on the girl in the house itself. Canning, therefore, glided unostentatiously into his position and, although Lesbia disliked the creature because he carefully kept George away, she had not the same hatred for him that she cherished for Mrs.

Petty. At his worst Canning was a harmless individual, condemned to do the dirty work of others, because he had not sufficient wage in an honest manner.

His nickname had been given him because of his marvellously thin looks, and these were certainly remarkably noticeable. At one time, as he confessed to Lesbia, he had exhibited himself in a travelling caravan as *The Living Skeleton*, but having slightly increased in weight he had been discharged. What his leanness must have been originally it is hard to say, as even now he was but skin and bone and, being tall, looked like a line—that is, he was length without breadth. His hands resembled a bird's claws, his legs were like sticks, and his skull would have served for a death's head, so devoid was it of flesh. With his lean, clean-shaven face, with his straight, jet-black hair, which he wore rather long, and with his skinny, lengthy, narrow figure encased in shabby broadcloth, he looked positively uncanny, and rude boys made remarks about him when he walked abroad. He glided about like a shadow, haunted shady corners like a shadow, and spoke in a whisper as a shadow should. The name fitted him exactly, and he looked a creature of the night, quite out of place in the cheerful sunshine.

Lesbia did not approve of him at first, for obvious reasons, and even disliked him actively when she found how he dogged her footsteps. But it so happened that the gods chose to turn her heart to a friendless man, and the consequences of the change were more far-reaching than she guessed at the moment.

The days went by very heavily, since her heart was with George and she could not see him. Certainly she contrived through the ever-faithful Tim to get a note transmitted to him—the same that George read on the river. And under cover of Tim's name he sent an answer which assured her that he was still faithful and still loving and ever hopeful of better days. Lesbia carried about that letter in her bosom day and night and read it when she felt particularly down-hearted, which happened not infrequently. She also waited and she also hoped. Then an event occurred, which in aftertime showed how mysteriously things work out to their hidden ends.

The Shadow fell ill in spite of the warm summer weather. Being of a sickly constitution, he unexpectedly caught influenza, and was forced to go to bed in the little room near Tim's sanctum. Hale, who had a horror of sickness, at once decided to turn him out; but Sargent, also afraid, refused to permit the valet to return to his Cookham house. There appeared to be no refuge for the miserable man but the hospital or the workhouse, until Lesbia suddenly asserted herself and insisted upon nursing him back to health. Mr. Hale objected, but his daughter, for the first time in her life, remained firm and, having already sufficient troubles on his hand without creating more, he yielded in the end. Moreover, he thought that acting as a sick-nurse would give Lesbia something to do and take her thoughts away from George. So she was permitted to nurse Canning, while Mr. Hale betook himself to Tait's sumptuous mansion at Henley.

Mrs. Petty declined to look after the sick man, so Lesbia took full charge of the case, and was assisted by Tim. Not that Tim approved of The Shadow: but, being tender-hearted, he considered him a poor creature, and so acted the part of the Good Samaritan.

Canning grew delirious and seemed in danger of passing away: but Lesbia set herself to struggle with death, and in the end she conquered.

When the man was sane again and rapidly regaining his strength, Tim told him all that the young mistress had done. It was then that the Irishman saw two big tears roll down the thin cheeks of the spy.

When Lesbia entered to see how he was, he spoke weakly but to the point. "I have been kicked about all my life," said The Shadow brokenly, "and no one has ever said a kind word to me. Mr. Hale and Captain Sargent have treated me worse than a dog, and but for you, Miss Lesbia, I should have been thrown out to die in the street. You hate me because I was set to watch you——"

"I don't hate you now, Canning," she interposed, hastily. "After all, you only performed the duty you were set to do by my father."

"And by Captain Sargent," whispered The Shadow. "Don't forget Captain Sargent. I never shall," and his

weak hand clenched under the coverlet. "But you have acted like an angel, Miss Lesbia, and some day I may be able to repay you for what you have done."

"I only did my duty," said the girl, tucking him in.

"You are the first woman or man who has ever done duty by me in this world," said Canning, the tears rolling down his face. I know what I know, and some day you may want my help. You shall have it. Yes! you shall have it at whatever cost."

"What do you know?" she asked wonderingly.

"Never mind." He turned his face to the wall. "When the time comes, call upon me, and I will help you."

Nothing more was said at the moment, as the man was not sufficiently recovered to converse much. Lesbia thought occasionally of what he had said, but could not entirely understand his meaning, unless it was that he would shut his eyes to the coming of George, should that young man choose to risk a visit. But the days went by, and George did not come, for, as Canning was sick, Mrs. Petty kept a very strict watch on the girl.

Gradually the words of the sick man were forgotten by Lesbia; and when he went away, entirely recovered, she forgot him, having more important matters to think about.

It was shortly after Canning's departure that Hale returned from Henley with a story which made Lesbia write—and write willingly—the letter of dismissal, which had broken Walker's heart. After she sent it away her father patted her shoulder, and spoke kindly to her.

"You are now acting as a sensible girl," he said, with chill politeness; "and there is no longer any need for Mrs. Petty to remain. I know that you do not like her, so I shall send her away this evening. Canning has also gone and will not return. Things can revert to their original course, and you can manage the house along with Tim. But remember, Lesbia, that if your heart softens towards this scamp, I shall recall both The Shadow and Mrs. Petty to watch over you."

Lesbia, with a white face and set lips, looked straight

at her father. "I will neither write to George again, nor will I see him," she said, with a stifled sob. "But whatever you say about his guilt, remember that I do not believe it. He is innocent."

"Then why not stick by him?" asked her father cruelly.

"You know well enough why I do not—why I cannot. George and I are now entire strangers, and must remain so until the mystery of this burglary is cleared up."

"It will never be cleared up, because there is nothing to clear up," said her father calmly. "George stole those jewels of Tait's for your sake, and it is only Tait's friendship for his mother and Maud's kind heart that prevent Walker being arrested and condemned as a thief."

Lesbia's lip curled. "I mistrust Miss Ellis's kind heart," said she.

Hale shrugged his thin shoulders. "You can do what you like about that," he remarked carelessly, "but remember that she holds George in the hollow of her hand. All you have to do is to forget him and marry Sargent."

"No!" said Lesbia positively. "I shall never see George again, since circumstances are too strong for him and for me. But I will never marry Captain Sargent. Be sure of that."

"He loves you, and——"

"I don't love him. Say no more, father. What I say, I stand by."

"You said much before which you have not held by," retorted Hale, his temper rising; "and circumstances may prove too much for you. However, Sargent can wait, and so can I. Meanwhile, since you have dismissed this young fool, you are free to come and go as you desire."

"One moment," said Lesbia, as her father turned his heel. "What about that amethyst cross?"

Hale wheeled round with a colour in his parchment cheeks, and a suspicious look in his cold grey eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You declared that if George recovered the cross he could marry me."

"I hold to that, since I am not a man to go back on my word."

"But how can I marry George when you say that you can prove he is guilty of this burglary?"

"Maud Ellis can prove it, not I," returned Mr. Hale. He paused and bit his lip hard. "I believe in the face of Walker's new escapade that he knows who took that cross. His former behaviour may have been a sham, as was his acting in the gallery. Let him bring me the cross, and perhaps after all he may be able to marry you."

"I shall never marry him until his character is cleared," said Lesbia firmly.

Hale shrugged his shoulders again. "You will find it difficult to clear him, my dear," he sneered, and went away.

Mr. Hale would have spoken rightly in connection with a less determined girl. But Lesbia, for all her fragile looks, was very determined and also very much in love with George Walker. Appearances were against him, and, judging by circumstantial evidence, he certainly was guilty. But Lesbia could not bring herself to believe that the man she loved had sunk to being a common thief. Now that she was free to leave the cottage and wander whither she would, it was an easy matter to seek out George at Medmenham, and ask direct questions.

But this Lesbia did not do, because her father had detailed fully all that Walker had said and all that he had done, so there was no more to learn in that quarter. Moreover, Hale had stated with a sneer that Maud Ellis was desperately in love with the young man, and Lesbia recalled George's hesitation about speaking of his desire to leave Tait's office. "There are other things to be considered," Walker had said, and then had blushed. Now the girl knew intuitively that he referred to Maud Ellis.

Lesbia's face grew flushed and angry as she thought of her rival. She trusted George, who was her very own, but instinctively she knew the wiles of women, and dreaded lest her letter of dismissal should throw the young man into the arms of the stockbroker's niece. Thus it came about that Lesbia's meditations led her,

not to Mrs. Walker's cottage at Medmenhem, but to the splendid mansion at Henley where Maud Ellis was waiting for George to come to her.

Maud had learned from Mr. Hale that George had received his letter of dismissal from Lesbia, and so waited to catch him on the recoil. He would certainly come back to her who had so boldly stood by him when he had been accused. But as the days went by George did not come, and Maud's heart grew sick, for she was honestly in love.

Her uncle was absent in the City, still seeking for the lost jewels, and the local police together with a couple of detectives from Scotland Yard were doing their best to solve the mystery. But all efforts were in vain. No trace had been found of the thieves, and the jewels could not be recovered. Tait invited no more people to his Henley mansion, and remained a great deal in London grumbling over his loss. Maud would have gone up also, but that she waited vainly at home in the hope that George would come to her for consolation.

One afternoon while she was thus waiting, and had arrayed herself in her prettiest frock on the chance of a visit, the footman intimated that a young lady wished to see her. She had no card, said the footman, and had simply stated that her name was Miss Lesbia Hale.

Maud's eyes flashed when she heard the name of her rival, and she ordered the man to lead the guest at once to the drawing-room. Miss Ellis was desperately anxious to see the face that had captured the heart of George Walker. Before repairing to the drawing-room, she altered a few things about her dress, for, being very much the woman, she knew that she was about to meet a dangerous foe. A man would not notice a dress overmuch, but a woman would, at the very first glance, and Maud was determined that there should be no flaw in her armour, so far as frocks and frills went.

Lesbia, very pale, but quite calm, waited impatiently for the appearance of Miss Ellis. When that young lady sailed into the room with outstretched hands and a beaming smile, Lesbia rose with a stony face and a cold, distant manner. Maud's hands fell, when she saw that she was being kept at a distance, and she became

formal also. In her heart she grew angry when she saw Lesbia's beauty, for, being very sensible, she knew that her own looks were much inferior. A shade passed over her face, but soon was replaced by a malicious smile. Maud knew that, beauty or no beauty, she held the trump card and could win the game at her leisure. Lesbia saw that smile.

"I know why you look like that," she said abruptly.

Maud straightened her neat figure, and raised her sandy eyebrows.

"What a very strange speech to make at our first meeting, Miss Hale!" she said, coldly and superciliously.

"Ah!" retorted Lesbia, "you see that I am not used to society."

"Is there any occasion to tell me that?" asked Maud sweetly.

But Lesbia was too desperately in earnest to be daunted by such feline talk. "There is no occasion to tell you many things," she said, "nor is there need for beating about the bush. My father has told me everything."

"About what, may I ask?"

"About this burglary and about George."

"George?" Miss Ellis raised her eyebrows again.

"George?" she repeated.

"I have the right to call him so," rejoined Lesbia hotly. "I am engaged to him, Miss Ellis."

"Was engaged, I understand."

"Yes." Lesbia suddenly looked fatigued and would have dearly liked to sit down, but pride prevented her. Maud saw this and scratched again.

"Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you!" replied Lesbia, stiffening. "I am only here for a few minutes, and can say all that I have to say in that time."

Miss Ellis flicked a scented handkerchief across her lips to hide a smile, and looked searchingly at her visitor's white face. "I really don't know why you talk to me like this."

"Oh yes, you do. In the same way I knew why you smiled when you entered. You think that you can win the game. But you sha'n't!"

"What game?"

"The game we play for George. My father has told me all. I love George and you love him also."

"Your father seems to be very well informed," sneered Maud, flushing.

"He usually is," Lesbia assured her with great coolness. "It was only when my father told me about this burglary, that I learned you loved George."

"I do love him!" cried Maud defiantly, "but I don't see that it matters to you—now."

"It matters a great deal," said Lesbia coldly. "I am only an unsophisticated girl, Miss Ellis, but I don't intend to give up the man I love, without a struggle."

"I understand that you have given him up."

"For the time being, until I can force you to prove his innocence."

"Force me!" Miss Ellis raised her eyebrows for the third time, but her face grew angry, for she did not like this very straight speaking. "What have I to do with the matter? I believe that George is innocent myself, and told my uncle so. Indeed, had I not stood up for George, he would now be in gaol."

Lesbia smiled contemptuously. "It's all part of the game," she retorted. "I am a woman, not a man, Miss Hale, and I can see very plainly how George walked into the trap you set for him."

"I set no trap for him. And if George says——"

"George says nothing. I have not seen him for a long time. But my father told me how George was in the gallery and you also."

"Did he tell you that George came to meet me?" asked Maud maliciously.

"No, nor do I believe you."

"Then he did."

"It is a lie," said Lesbia, impolitely but very firmly. "I don't believe it."

"Ask George himself," cried Maud. "He will tell you that we had a meeting at three in the morning, and——"

Lesbia, who was looking at her, gave an ironical laugh. "Oh, I believe you now," she said slowly. "I can see the truth in your eyes. George did meet you by appointment. Why, I don't know——"

"Because he loved me."

"He never loved you!" cried Lesbia furiously, and

looked so angry that Maud hastily stepped back a pace, thinking she would be struck. "He loves me, and me only. But you inveigled him into the gallery, into a trap, and made use of this burglary to force him to be your husband."

"I told my uncle that George was innocent."

"Yes, because it suited your book to do so. But you told my father, and he passed the message on to me, that if I did not dismiss George you would prove his guilt."

Maud tore her handkerchief to ribbons. "And I can too," she said between her teeth. "You are quite right. To the world I should say nothing; but to you I can say what I please. We love the same man. I want him, and I am going to get him. I *did* trap George into a meeting, but the burglary was unforeseen. I can make use of it, which, let me remind you, Miss Hale, I have not done yet. Remember, I was chloroformed, and the key was taken from my neck to open the safe. What would be easier than for me to declare that George Walker asked me to meet him in the gallery and rendered me insensible and stole the jewels, after taking the key, and buried them in the garden, coming back to tell falsehoods? And if I speak——"

"You won't speak."

"I shall speak, rather than let George marry you," flashed out Maud.

Lesbia sneered. "You remind me of the motto of the French Revolution," she said. "'Be my brother or I'll kill you.' So George is to marry you——"

"Or go to gaol. Exactly!"

"Thank you!" Lesbia moved swiftly to the door.

"Now that I know your intentions I can go."

"What will you do?" Maud followed, aghast at this abrupt departure.

"Prove George's innocence, and marry him."

"Try!" said Maud, between her teeth, "try—and fail."

CHAPTER X

THE DEUS EX MACHINA

IF Lesbia had been a trifle more versed in the ways of the wicked world, she would have remained longer

in conversation with Maud, if only to learn about that lady's plans. Maud declared that unless George became her husband she would have him put into gaol for the burglary. But it was difficult to know how she intended to proceed. Of course, she could declare that Walker had chloroformed her and had stolen the key of the strong-room to steal the jewels, but she had no one to prove the truth of her story, plausible as it was, in the face of Walker's known presence in the picture-gallery. It was George's word against Maud's and, therefore, the law would have no easy matter to prove the young man's supposed guilt.

But Lesbia was so hot with indignation at the discovery of Maud's mean plot that she ended the interview abruptly, and walked quickly away, trying to stifle her rage. For George's sake it was necessary that she should keep a clear head, and it was necessary also that she should learn the truth of this conspiracy—as she verily believed it to be.

Come what might, Lesbia decided in her own mind that George should marry her. But to bring this about she had not only to clear his character, but to find the amethyst cross and restore it to her father. But where the cross might be she could not guess. The mystery of the robbery and of George's presence in the cottage on that fatal night had never been cleared up.

Walking swiftly down to the river Lesbia thought over these things, and thought still more when she entered Tim's boat. The little man had rowed her up to Henley at her request, and now took her back in the same way. She had detailed her reasons for visiting Miss Ellis, but had received scanty comfort from Tim. He was disposed to take a gloomy view of the matter.

"It's the crass, bad luck to it!" groaned Tim, when she told him how badly she had fared. "Sure, there's niver bin a moment's pace since it was lost."

"That is very true," rejoined Lesbia, steering the boat towards the lock, and reviewing in her own mind the untoward circumstances which had disturbed her life since the proposal of George in the garden. From the time when the cross had been given to him, there had been nothing but incessant trouble. Her father had raged, her lover had been assaulted, her liberty had

been curtailed, and George had lost his situation through being accused of a sordid crime. And to crown all, another woman, of whose existence she had scarcely heard, had stepped in to claim Walker as her future husband.

"It's very true," sighed Lesbia dolefully, "the cross has brought nothing but trouble. If we could get it back again things might mend. But the question is, how to recover it?"

Tim bent to his oars, and shook his head with another groan. "Let it bide, miss, let it bide. Sure, we don't want more kick-ups. Me mother, rist her sowl, towld me that the crass wud bring lashins av worry whin ye guv it off av yer hand. An' it's truth she spoke, me dear."

"Do you know where she got the cross, Tim?"

"Sure, miss, an' didn't she tell ye whin she died? 'Twas yer mother's. I know no more nor that, me dear, 'twas your mother's. As for Masther Garge, cudn't ye forgit him, miss?"

"No!" cried Lesbia indignantly. "I shall love George as long as I live. I can no more forget him than he can forget me. Would you have me marry Captain Sargent?"

"Sure an' I wudn't. He's a proud baste, an' if ye married him, me dear, he'd be afther bringing me to the gallows, for his treatment av ye, Miss Lesbia."

"Then don't let us talk any more about the matter," cried Lesbia, impetuously. "I shall keep my faith with George."

"Wud ye like to see him, miss?"

"No," said the girl promptly. "I told him in my letter that we must never meet again. Nor will we until this mystery of the burglary is cleared up. I intend to clear it up."

"But how, miss? Ye've no wan to help ye."

Lesbia reflected. "There's The Shadow," she said quietly.

"An' what wud that poor cratur be afther doing, miss?"

"I don't know. But he offered to help me, so I shall put his professions of gratitude to the test. Tim, to-night you must go down to Cookham and bring him back with you."

"Augh!" groaned Tim, annoyed that anyone but himself should do anything for his darling. "Sure he's out av the house, so let him bide, me dear."

"If you don't go to Cookham, I will," said Lesbia firmly.

"An' have trouble wid that baste av a captain? Me dear, I'll go."

And Tim was as good as his word.

Lesbia reached the cottage to find that her father had left a note saying he had gone to London for a few days. Hale was always stealing off on mysterious errands, possibly connected with his equally mysterious business.

Of late no odd characters had been coming to the cottage, but Hale was absent much more frequently. On this occasion his absence was welcome, as it gave Lesbia a chance of arranging her plans with Canning. What these might be she had, as yet, no very clear idea. All she intended to do was to explain the situation and ask The Shadow what was best to be done. When she received his opinion, she could then take a step forward into the veiling mists which surrounded her.

While Tim rowed down to Cookham, which he did after landing Lesbia at the bottom of the garden, the girl ran into the cottage. She found that she had it all to herself as, true to his promise, Mr. Hale had dismissed Mrs. Petty. That good lady, liking the easy place, had retired in high dudgeon, and would have shown fight but that Hale quelled her with a glance of his cold grey eye.

Hale, indeed, possessed a great power—perhaps a hypnotic power—over those who came to the cottage. Had not Canning fallen sick, and thus been removed from his influence, it is very questionable if he would have offered his services to Lesbia. However, he had done so, and the girl was about to accept them gratefully.

Lesbia passed the time in dressing herself for dinner, and in partaking of it. It was a homely meal, consisting of cold meat and salad, bread and cheese, and a glass of prime claret. Afterwards Lesbia made herself a cup of black coffee, and sat down in the tiny draw-

ing-room with a book, pending the arrival of The Shadow. But her thoughts wandered from the printed page to George, and more than ever she longed for his coming. It had cost her much to write the letter of dismissal, but in the face of Maud's threat, as conveyed to her by Hale, she could do nothing else. And the worst of it was that she had not been permitted to assign a cause for what George must regard as her heartless behaviour.

However, and very luckily, she had scanty time for sad reflections, for shortly she heard the hearty voice of Tim, as he entered the house by the back door, and later the sibilant whisper of The Shadow.

In a few minutes Canning presented himself, looking more lean and more dismal than ever in his customary suit of black. But his haggard face was lighted up with an eager smile. The mere fact that Lesbia had decided to avail herself of his services made him as gay as such a sad personage well could be. Canning was desperately anxious to repay the kindness he had received.

"I am glad to see you," said Lesbia cordially. "You lost no time."

"No miss," whispered the grim man, who stood with long, hanging arms at the door. "Captain Sargent went to London to-day with your father, and I came back with Tim at once. I am so glad you want me to help you, miss."

"I need your help very badly," sighed Lesbia, passing her hand across her brow. "Will you not sit down, Canning?"

"In your presence, miss? Please excuse me."

"But you are yet weak after your illness. Sit down. I want you to."

Thus urged, The Shadow sank softly on to the extreme edge of a convenient chair placed near the door. Here he fixed his sad eyes on the beautiful vision at the window, and adored in silence.

Lesbia turned matters over in her mind. She knew that she would have to speak very plainly, and had a natural reluctance to doing so, since Canning was a servant and a stranger.

Still, he was the sole person who could help her, as

now that George was out of her life—temporarily, at all events—she felt very lonely. Her father neither gave her affection nor desired any, and certainly would not put out a hand to save George, much less clear his character. Why should he, when he wanted Walker out of the way so that his daughter could marry Sargent?

Lesbia thought of these things with her eyes on the floor, and finally determined to confess everything, as her plight and that of George was too desperate to permit of over-nice feelings.

With some colour, therefore, she related the whole story from the time that Walker had proposed to the result of her visit to Maud.

"I was forced to dismiss Mr. Walker," she said in addition, "because my father came back to tell me that Miss Ellis had threatened to have Mr. Walker arrested. I saw Miss Ellis also, as I have told you, and she declares that she can prove Mr. Walker's guilt, and will do so unless he marries her."

Canning with his sad eyes fixed upon her, heard the whole tale without comment. At the end he nodded. "What do you wish me to do, miss?"

"I want you to learn who committed this burglary at Mr. Tait's house, so that Mr. Walker can be cleared."

"But how can I do that, miss, when I am servant to Captain Sargent? I have my duties to consider."

"I know that," Lesbia faltered, and became downcast, "and then you have no experience in looking into these things. I am sorry you cannot help me."

"I did not say that, miss."

"Then you will?"

The Shadow reflected, but did not take his eyes from her eager face. "Yes," he said at length; "I will help you."

"Oh, Canning, thank you so much. But how?"

"I can't say yet, miss. In the first place I must leave Captain Sargent."

Lesbia rose impulsively. "I don't want you to lose your situation."

"I had intended to give the captain notice long ago," explained Canning, rising in his turn. "What you say decides me. I shall go to London, and in one

way or another I may be able to learn who stole those jewels."

"But why in London? They were stolen in Henley."

"Quite so, but the two thieves—if Mr. Walker is to be believed, there were two—must have taken the jewels to dispose of them in London. Leave everything to me, miss. I was in an inquiry office once, and know how to go about these matters. But," he hesitated, "it will require money."

"Oh!" Lesbia uttered an ejaculation of dismay. "I have none."

"Can't your father give you some, miss?"

Lesbia shook her head. "He wants me to marry Captain Sargent, so will not allow me to help Mr. Walker. No, my father will give me nothing. What is to be done?"

"I don't know, miss. But I have no money and I must have at least fifty pounds to work on. I shall learn about the burglary first, and then will discover who knocked down Mr. Walker and stole the cross." He paused. "Has Tim saved any money?"

"No, poor soul," sighed Lesbia, "my father never pays him any wages. I am sure he would lend me the money if he had it. There is no one from whom I can borrow, and——" here a sudden idea came to the girl, and she flushed crimson with mingled hope and nervous fear. "Oh!" she cried, "he might, he might!"

"Who might, miss?" asked the man sharply.

Lesbia took no notice. "Fifty pounds," she murmured. "It's a large sum of money. Still he might. He——" she stopped again as she saw The Shadow looking at her curiously. "Go away, Canning, and return to-morrow evening. I hope to have the fifty pounds by then."

"Miss," Canning spoke slowly and impressively, "you have honoured me with your confidence, and you will never regret doing so, as I am entirely devoted to you. Add to that confidence by telling me from whom you design to borrow this fifty pounds."

"There is no reason why you should not know," said Lesbia quickly. "I am thinking of Lord Charvington."

"Mr. Hale's cousin."

"Oh, you know that," she cried surprised.

"Yes." The Shadow laughed in his whispering, silent way, rather oddly. "I know more than you give me credit for. You see," he added, slowly, and with a downcast face, "I was at school with your father and Charvington."

"You!" Lesbia gasped in astonishment, and stared at the lean, dusky, untidy figure before her. Then she remembered the scrupulous refinement of the man, noted anew his excellent diction, and suddenly saw in the weird face and figure evidences of good breeding.

"Mr. Canning," she said suddenly, and gave him a new position at once, "you are a gentleman."

"I *was* a gentleman," he replied bitterly, and dropping his use of the word "miss." "Now I am Captain Sargent's valet and a wastrel. But I am also your very devoted servant, Miss Hale," he bowed. "Let it remain at that."

"But how did you come to——"

"Don't ask me—don't ask me," said Canning hurriedly. "Some day you will learn how I came to occupy this position. Meanwhile, get the fifty pounds from Charvington"—Lesbia noted that he spoke quite as an equal of the nobleman—"and give it to me. I shall save your lover and make your path straight for you."

"Can you do this, Mr. Canning?"

"Yes," he replied simply. "Good-night, Miss Hale. Please do not tell Tim what I have mentioned, and say nothing to Charvington. To-morrow night I shall come for the fifty, and the——" he paused, opened and closed his hand several times, and then vanished with a sigh. He might indeed have been a veritable shadow from the noiseless way in which he disappeared.

Lesbia remained spellbound. In a flash it occurred to her that she should long ago have guessed The Shadow to be other than he appeared. Now many things which had puzzled her became plain, and she wondered how a gentleman had sunk so low as to be a spy, and to occupy the position of Sargent's valet. But she had too much delicacy to question Canning, until such time as he chose of his own free will to speak out.

Besides, she had much to think about in connection with her proposed borrowing of fifty pounds from Lord Charvington. And unless she could procure that sum, there would be no chance of George being saved from the clutches of Maud Ellis.

The nobleman in question was a cousin of Mr. Hale's and had once or twice been to the cottage. Indeed, Lesbia had reason to believe that Lord Charvington allowed her father a certain sum every quarter, although this seemed strange in the face of Hale's assertion that he could give her two thousand a year if she married to his liking. There was also the business in the City, about which Lesbia knew nothing. Why should a man in business accept an annuity?

It was all very strange, but then everything connected with Mr. Walter Hale was strange, and now that Lesbia began to think, she began to mistrust her father. Why did he keep his business secret? Why did he accept an annuity, and then declare that he could give her a large income? Why did he have such shady people at the cottage whom he scarcely permitted her to see? Altogether Lesbia became aware that there was something sinister about her father's position. She felt like a watcher of a black cloud waiting for it to discharge lightning. More than ever did she determine at least to have the mysteries of the burglary and of the cross cleared up. The old time of peace had passed away for the girl, and now she felt that she would have to go forth and do battle.

With regard to Charvington, she knew him moderately well. He had always been kind to her, and she had heard her father state that the nobleman was her godfather. It seemed rather cool to apply to him for a loan of fifty pounds, but Lesbia was not only desperate but also very unsophisticated in worldly ways.

Almost without considering what she was about, she wrote a hurried letter asking him to lend her fifty pounds for six months, and promised to explain later why she desired the loan. She proposed in her own mind to repay the money by selling the amethyst cross when Canning should get it back for her, as she believed he would.

Of course the whole business was very naïve and

very childish, and a girl more versed in worldly things would never have ventured to take such a step. But Lesbia, just like a trusting child, asked for the money and posted her letter with a prayer that God would grant her request.

Like a newly-fledged gambler, who wins every game through sheer ignorance, Lesbia's desperately-played card turned up trumps in four-and-twenty hours. Lord Charvington sent her a cheque by return of post and invited her to come and explain matters to him personally. Lesbia danced with joy.

"Now!" she said to herself. "George is safe. Thank God!"

CHAPTER XI

THE SEAMY SIDE

WHEN Mr. Hale returned in three days from London, he was surprised to find Lesbia extremely cheerful. She had every right to be so, since she had given the fifty-pound cheque to Canning, and he was now in town looking into the matter of the Henley burglary. How Canning managed to get away from his master so expeditiously, Lesbia could not tell, nor did she inquire. It was quite enough for her to know that The Shadow was searching into the case. To Lord Charvington she had sent a letter thanking him for the money, and promising to come over and tell him everything as soon as she could. These things made her hopeful and bright in spite of her enforced severance from George, and she managed, by looking towards a bright future, to possess her soul in patience. But Hale was ignorant of what she was doing, and her behaviour puzzled him.

"I thought you loved Walker," he said abruptly, and with suspicion.

"Of course I do," rejoined the girl cheerfully.

"It does not seem like it."

Lesbia shrugged her shoulders. "What is the use of crying over spilt milk?" she asked. "My going about with a long face will not make George's position any the more endurable. Some day when his character has been cleared things will change."

"They will never change," said Mr. Hale coldly and severely. "Walker has committed a sordid crime, and can never marry you."

"I don't believe that he is guilty," retorted Lesbia deliberately. "And even if I grant for the sake of argument that he is, Miss Ellis does not seem to think that his guilt is a bar to his marriage with her."

"She's a love-sick fool."

"So am I."

"With this difference; that she can marry him and you can't. And talking of Miss Ellis," went on Hale, becoming more stern than ever, "I saw her in London and she told me that you had actually been to see her."

"Why not?" asked Lesbia defiantly. "That is no crime."

"It is an impertinence to see her and to talk to her as you did. Why did you go, Lesbia?"

"I wished to find out how she proposed to force George to become her husband. I have learned that much. She intends to force him by telling a lie."

"How do you know that what she says is a lie?" demanded Hale angrily.

"Because I read it in her eyes. A man would not have done so, but I am a woman, and you can trust one woman to learn everything another woman leaves unsaid, especially when a man is the stake between them."

"You should have more modesty," snapped her father uncomfortably.

Lesbia coloured. "I have behaved properly in every way," she said, in a wounded voice; "and, as I love George, I had every right to learn how this woman proposed to take him from me."

"Well, you know now that she can."

"She *thinks* she can," said Lesbia, with emphasis; "that is different."

"Nonsense! She can prove that he took the key from her neck and stole the jewels," insisted Mr. Hale.

"It is her word against his," rejoined Lesbia drily; "and until Miss Ellis proves the truth of her statement I believe in George's innocence."

"Lesbia," cried her father, rising, "what has come

to you? Formerly you used to be quiet and well-behaved and did as you were told; now——”

“Now,” said the girl, getting on her feet and looking very straight at her father; “now I am a woman fighting for her happiness, and so will do my best to hold my own against your tyranny.”

Hale did not like the word, and said so. “I am your father and no tyrant.”

“You are both, and much more the latter than the former. I don’t know how it is,” said Lesbia, pondering, “but I have an idea that you are using me as a pawn in some game you are playing. Miss Ellis is in the game also, and so is Captain Sargent. What the game may be I don’t know, and I decline to be pushed about a chess-board without knowing why I move.”

“You shall do as you are told,” said Hale, livid with secret rage, but not daring to show it openly, lest he should lose more of his already waning influence.

“I shall do as I think fit,” retorted the girl, her spirit up in arms. “I don’t care if you are fifty times my father, you shall not treat me in this way any longer. If I can clear George’s character, I shall see him and marry him, and if you dare to bring in Mrs. Petty to spy on me, I shall appeal to my godfather.”

“Your godfather! And who may he be?”

“You told me once and I have never forgotten. Lord Charvinton is my——”

“I spoke at random,” broke in Hale hastily. “He is not your godfather. He is nothing more than my cousin and my friend.”

“And your benefactor,” said Lesbia, unable to resist the shaft. “And being so, what will he say if he learns how unkindly you are behaving?”

“Lesbia, you are mad!”

“No! For years I have been your puppet. Lately I have discovered that I am a human being with a will of my own. So long as you leave me alone I am content to behave as your daughter. But I decline to endure tyranny, and I decline to be made use of in this mysterious game you are playing. I am very glad you spoke to me this morning, father, as it was time we came to an understanding”; and Lesbia, with her head up, marched out of the room. But she would have

been scared had she looked back and seen the expression on her father's face. It was little less than devilish with rage and baffled cunning.

The worm had been obedient for so long that Hale had never expected the turning, and it came upon him with a shock. He could not afford to let Lesbia appeal for protection to his noble relative, as he knew that Lord Charvington was the kindest of men and would, undoubtedly, interfere.

Of course, in an ordinary case, Hale could have prevented such interference between a father and daughter. But with Charvington, who allowed him an annuity, it was different. If Hale did not behave well to Lesbia, he felt very certain that Charvington would punish him by taking away the quarterly sum. And in spite of his business in the City, and his boast that he could give Lesbia two thousand a year, Hale could not afford to lose so certain an income.

He therefore said no more to Lesbia on the subjects of George and Miss Ellis and the burglary. Nor did he bring back *The Shadow* and Mrs. Petty. Indeed, he could not bring back the former, as he had heard from Sargent that the man had thrown up his situation and had gone to London.

This being the case, if Lesbia chose to see George it was impossible to prevent her from having her own way. But Hale trusted that after the letter of dismissal George would refuse to have anything to do with the girl who had apparently thrown him over. Meanwhile, he asked Sargent to the cottage frequently, and advised him to prosecute his wooing with all zeal. "If you don't secure the girl soon, you will lose her," said Hale emphatically.

"I shall do so as soon as I can get a chance of seeing her alone," said Sargent, and strove to look the handsome, gallant lover.

It was after dinner that he spoke thus; and in the light which came through the rosy shades of the candles he seemed wonderfully young, and not at all bad-looking. As usual, he was perfectly dressed in evening array, and yet had that ultra-fashionable air which is such a mark of inferior breeding. Captain Alfred Sargent looked like a gentleman, and yet there was some-

thing lacking in manner to complete the dress and pretensions. The rosy lights made him look less colourless for the moment; but when in pursuance of his object he strolled into the garden to meet Lesbia, he became quite wan, white and worn-looking in the warm summer moonlight.

Miss Hale, in a simple white dress, looking sweet and girlish and remarkably pretty, sat on the bench under the chestnut—in the very place where George had made his memorable proposal. Disliking Sargent as she did, and the more so since her father wished her to marry him, she had early left the dinner table to take refuge in this love-haunted spot, and dream of George.

With the inconsequence of a woman, she rather resented the fact that her lover had not replied to his letter of dismissal. She had not thought that he would accept her decision so readily, and in her heart she desired that he should come along to take her by storm. At times she fancied, indeed, that he would suddenly appear to carry her off to the nearest church, and so frequently sought the garden to afford him an opportunity to play "Young Lochinvar."

There was also another reason. In the garden she hoped to meet The Shadow. Lately, he had sent her a line—through Tim—stating that he had discovered a clue to the robbery, and that he would come down to tell her about it. Lesbia appointed the bottom of the garden as the best place of meeting, as her father rarely came there, and Canning could easily row up to the landing-stage in the twilight. Every evening she expected him, but as yet he had not appeared. Thus, she was much annoyed when she beheld the slender form of the ex-captain in the distance.

With a cigarette in his mouth, which he was languidly smoking, Sargent strolled pensively down the path, and finally came to a halt before the pretty figure on the garden-seat. Lesbia looked at him blankly, and gave him no encouragement.

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Hale," said the gallant captain, forced by her silence to utter the first word.

"They are worth the Bank of England," replied Lesbia, resolving to make the best of this bore, since

to get rid of him by plain speaking only meant unnecessary trouble with her father.

"In that case," said Sargent softly, and advancing nearer, "may I hope they were of me?"

"If you are so very egotistic," said the girl biting,ly, "you can think so."

"You are cruel," muttered Sargent, somewhat disconcerted. He had not expected so cutting a speech from so apparently timid a girl. "Why are you so cruel to me, Lesbia—I may call you Lesbia, may I not?"

"No," said Lesbia coldly, "I see no reason why you should. As to being cruel, Captain Sargent, I am not aware that I am."

"Surely," fenced the captain, "you are aware that I love you."

Lesbia laughed, and he was more disconcerted than ever. "I am aware that my father wishes me to marry you; but he said nothing about love."

"He left it for me to say."

"Well, then, say it," remarked Miss Hale cruelly.

Sargent had met plenty of women and, with his good looks and reputation for wealth, had usually scored an easy victory. But this girl was so straightforward and so absolutely calm that he did not know how to proceed. With an uneasy laugh he strove to fall into her humour. "I love you," he stammered.

"Why?" asked Lesbia, still calm and exasperating.

"Look in the glass, and ask me why," he said ardently. "Can I behold such loveliness and——"

"Captain Sargent," she broke in, smiling broadly, "you speak just like a lover of the mid-Victorian epoch. I have read such speeches in books, and I have always thought them exceedingly silly. Be more original!"

Don Giovanni himself would have turned restive when advised to alter his style of love-making, and Captain Sargent's waxen face grew red with wrath. He was a bloodless person, so his anger was more like that of a fretful child than that of a man.

Lesbia looked at him with a contempt which he found hard to bear. She wanted a man to master her,

as all women do, and she saw that this wooer could never dominate.

"You are very unkind, Lesbia," was all that Sargent could find to say.

"In that case, why not leave me and go back to my father?"

"Because I came from your father. He wants you to marry me. I want it also. Come," he went on coaxingly, "be my wife, Lesbia, and you shall have everything that the world can give you."

"I daresay. Everything but a husband."

"I shall be your husband."

"You!" she looked him up and down until he reddened to the roots of his straw-coloured hair. "I would rather be excused."

"You won't marry me?"

"Certainly not."

Sargent grew childish with rage. "If you do not there will be trouble. I can ruin that man you love—that bounder Walker!"

"He is not a bounder; he is a man, and it will take a stronger man than you, Captain Sargent, to harm him."

"But I *can* harm him, and I shall do so," cried the captain, and his delicate face took on an expression of cunning. Weak as he was, Lesbia could see that wounded vanity might make him dangerous. "This burglary——"

"What do you know about it?" demanded Lesbia imperiously.

"Walker is guilty. Miss Ellis says so."

"For her own ends she says so, and you act in the same way. She wants to marry George, and you want to marry me. It won't do, Captain Sargent. Things are not to be settled in that fashion. You had better," she laughed, "marry Miss Ellis yourself."

"I love you; I want to marry you."

"I am sorry," said Lesbia sedately, "but I decline."

"For your father's sake," urged Sargent weakly, angry, and looking more dangerously cunning than ever. "I can harm him also. I can——" He saw from the startled expression on the girl's face that he was saying too much, and abruptly turned on his heel. "I

shall come for my answer to-morrow, Lesbia," he called out, as he walked swiftly towards the house.

The girl remained where she was, wondering what this new threat meant. She could understand how he could support her father and Maud in harming George, but it was difficult to understand how he could harm Mr. Hale.

In a flash the old unrest came over Lesbia, and she again pondered her father's unaccountable secrecy, and recalled his shady acquaintances. Then again, there was Canning, who was a gentleman and had been to school with Mr. Hale, only to degenerate into Sargent's valet. It was all very singular and somewhat startling, and Lesbia puzzled over it hopelessly, until she was aroused from a somewhat painful brown study by a low whistle.

She looked up and around, to see a boat by the landing-stage, and in the boat Mr. Canning, apparently more frail than ever. Sargent was also shadowy, and it dawned upon Lesbia that the two might be related.

"Captain Sargent has just left me," she said, running down to the landing-stage. "He wanted to marry me and I refused."

"You were quite right, Miss Hale. If you married Sargent, you would be ruined for ever."

"He threatened to harm my father if I did not, and George also."

Mr. Canning threw back his head and laughed silently. "He can do his best to harm Walker by supporting Miss Ellis in her lie, but it will take a much stronger man than Alfred to——" Here he became aware that he had appeared unduly familiar with his late master's name.

"I thought so," said Lesbia, recalling how like the two men were in looks and fragility; "you are related to Captain Sargent; you are his brother."

"Yes," said Mr. Canning, looking very pale. "Since you have guessed so cleverly I may as well admit it. But I shall not tell you my story now. Later will be time enough. Meanwhile, say nothing to your father about having guessed that Alfred is my brother. How did you——"

"Oh," said Lesbia smiling, "you are exactly alike. Both pale and both slender, with the same cast of face and the same colour of hair, and—oh, it's wonderful!—I believe you are twins."

Mr. Canning shirked this question. He came ashore and passed with Lesbia under the chestnut tree, behind the trunk in fact, so that they might not be seen from the cottage windows.

"I have discovered the truth," he said, in his usual whisper, "but at present you must not ask me how I came to learn it. But George Walker is innocent. Mr. Tait had the jewels stolen so as to get the insurance money."

Lesbia gasped with amazement. "Are you certain?" she demanded; and when he nodded, asked another question: "How did you learn so quickly?"

"That is a secret just now," said Canning equably. "Remember that I warned you before that you must not ask that question. It is sufficient to say that I found out how Mr. Tait insured these jewels for a large sum of money, and then employed two clever London thieves to steal them. Tait will get the insurance money, and he will also unset the jewels and sell them in India and America. Of course, the thieves will have to be paid for the risk they took, though it was not a great one, as Tait left the gallery doors open, and gave them the key which he had on his watch-chain to open the safe. If Miss Ellis had not come down, if Walker had not followed, there would have been no scandal."

"Mr. Canning," said Lesbia, after a moment's thought, "did Miss Ellis know that this robbery was about to take place? From all that I have heard of her, she is deep in her uncle's confidence."

"I cannot be sure if she is an accessory before the fact," replied Canning, speaking in legal phraseology.

"But I can," cried the girl, leaping to a conclusion with the intuitive certainty of a woman. "I see the whole scheme. Miss Ellis knew that the jewels would be stolen somewhere about three o'clock in the morning, and so appointed that hour to meet George and implicate him in the crime. It was a carefully arranged trap into which he walked wholly unconsciously."

"But her reason?" asked Canning, somewhat perplexed.

Lesbia laughed. "You are a mere man, Mr. Canning, and cannot understand. It takes a woman to fathom the duplicity of another woman. Miss Ellis loved George, and as he would not marry her willingly, she lured him into this trap, so as to—— Oh!" Lesbia broke off, clenching her little fists and stamping with anger. "But she shall not! she shall not! I shall see her and defy her. And you, Mr. Canning—you?"

"I am returning to London, to hide," said the man quietly; "but I can come down here when it is necessary. I shall send you my address as soon as I arrange where to conceal myself."

"But why should you conceal yourself?"

"That is too long a story to tell you at present. It is enough for you to know that what I have discovered about Tait—what I have told you—is dangerous to me. No, Miss Hale, do not ask me further questions, for I dare not answer. I have jeopardised my liberty, and perhaps my life, by what I have done for you."

"I do not understand," said Lesbia, somewhat scared.

"It is as well that you do not," said Canning sombrely. "Bluebeard's chamber is a dangerous room to look into. When it is necessary—if it ever is—you shall know what I am concealing now. Meanwhile, I shall go into hiding in London."

"What am I to do?"

"See Miss Ellis," rejoined The Shadow promptly. "Tell her what I have discovered and give my name as your authority—that is, say how Captain Sargent's servant looked into the matter. You can suppress the fact of my being a gentleman and Sargent's brother. Tell Miss Ellis also that when the time comes I can prove that her uncle had the jewels stolen so as to get the insurance money, in addition to the money from the sale of the jewels, in order to tide over a financial crisis. Twenty thousand from the jewels and a like amount from Lloyd's," ended Canning cynically, "will give Mr. Tait ample funds with which to retrieve his position. He was in danger of bankruptcy, but this crime, engineered by himself, has saved his credit."

"What wickedness!" murmured Lesbia, as Canning moved towards his boat.

"Oh, such things are classed under the head of business by people like Tait. But I must get away before my brother or your father sees me; and Canning loosened the painter, slipped into the boat, and took the oars, not without an anxious glance at the cottage.

"Thank you for what you have done," cried Lesbia softly, remaining, for obvious reasons, behind the tree-trunk.

"No at all. I have only repaid my debt—that is, if such a debt can ever be paid. Au revoir, Miss Hale!" and raising his shabby cap with all the good breeding of a gentleman, Canning pulled away with an easy, clean stroke which could only have been learned at a public school.

CHAPTER XII

A COUNTERPLOT

CAPTAIN SARGENT was somewhat disheartened by Lesbia's steady opposition to his wooing. He was not virile enough to take her heart by storm, and his usual tactics did not seem to succeed with this cool, quiet, observant girl, who looked at him so straight. Also his threats of harming George Walker and Mr. Hale, proved to be but blunt weapons and could not penetrate the shield of Lesbia's composure. Sargent retreated from the field of battle thoroughly beaten, and he must have confessed as much to Hale, for that gentleman took his daughter to task when she returned to the cottage after her secret interview with Canning. The unsuccessful lover had already departed, and Lesbia listened for ten minutes to her father's denunciations of what he was pleased to style her wickedness.

"You ought to be flattered that so rich and handsome a man loves you," raged Mr. Hale, who for once in his life lost his self-control. "You seem to forget that if I died to-morrow—and I might, as my heart is affected—you would be left penniless."

Lesbia raised her eyebrows. "I understood you to

say that you could leave me two thousand a year," she observed quietly.

"If you marry as I wish," cried her father furiously, "not otherwise. Failing your becoming the wife of my dear friend Sargent, I shall leave the money to Lord Charvington."

"Well," said the girl cheerfully, "that would only be fair since he has paid you a pension for so long."

"What do you know about that?" snapped Hale, changing colour.

"Very little. But you certainly told me in an expansive moment that Lord Charvington, as your cousin, allowed you a small income."

"Precious small," muttered Hale, not contradicting.

"But why does he allow you anything?" asked Lesbia, very directly. "With two thousand a year you cannot wish for his help."

Hale took a turn up and down the room, then stopped opposite to his daughter and spoke in quieter tones, but none the less emphatic. "I am not enjoying two thousand a year at present," he declared slowly, "and so accept an annuity from Charvington, who, being my cousin, has every right to assist me."

"I don't see that," murmured the girl, shrugging.

"It doesn't matter what you see, or what you don't see," cried Hale, his temper again getting beyond control. "Do as you are told, or chance the consequences."

"Be a pawn, in fact," she rejoined ironically. "A pawn on your chessboard."

"Hale shrugged in his turn. "Put it how you like," he retorted, "but obey."

"Certainly not. I am a human being, and have the right to——"

"You have the right to do nothing," broke in her father desperately. "See here, my girl, you are making a great mistake by not letting me guide you. Had you been open about that amethyst cross, I should never have allowed you to give it to George Walker. Its possession means more than you think. The two thousand a year depends upon its production."

"Oh!" Lesbia opened her eyes widely. "I see. Then you are willing that I should marry George if you get this two thousand."

"Yes," said Hale bluntly; "but, for circumstances which do not concern you, I prefer that you should marry Sargent."

"Marriage with anyone concerns me a great deal," said Lesbia coolly, "and I decline to marry a man I do not love. As to the cross: it was my own property, left to me by my mother, and if its production will bring me two thousand a year I am very sorry it is lost."

"I did not say that it meant two thousand a year to *you*," said Hale uneasily, and with a scowl.

"Pardon me, father. I assume that, since I am the owner of the cross. However, it is lost and neither I nor you know where to find it. That being the case, I refuse to marry Captain Sargent and shall marry George."

"You have sent him away: you forget that."

"I can bring him again to my feet."

"Lesbia! Lesbia! you are playing with fire."

"Probably, but I shall continue to play until you tell me the meaning of all these things."

"I have told you all about the cross——"

"Quite so," interrupted the girl drily, "and I now know why George was assaulted and his mother's cottage robbed."

"You dare to say that I am the guilty person?" demanded her father suspiciously.

"Oh no. If you were, you would have the cross; and thus being able to get the two thousand a year, you would not oppose my marriage with George. You are innocent!"

"Thank you for nothing," sneered Hale coolly; "but you can reckon on this, Lesbia, that if I could have knocked down George and robbed him of the cross I should have done so."

"That is candid, father."

"You asked me to be candid. But, hold your tongue, or else talk sense. You must marry Sargent. I shall not allow you to throw yourself away on that thief, and——"

"Stop!" cried Lesbia, rising indignantly. "You shall not call George names in my hearing. He is no thief."

"Can you prove that?"

It was on the tip of the girl's tongue to speak out and accuse Tait. But she first desired to see Maud Ellis in order to cut her claws, and therefore, with a self-restraint far beyond her years, she shook her head.

Hale sneered again. "You are a silly romantic fool," he scoffed, "and sooner or later I shall force you to do my will."

"Never! Never! Never!"

"Oh, very well," replied Hale, baffled by her obstinacy, "then I shall go to London and leave you here. I shall not speak to you, or eat with you, or have anything to do with you, until you obey me as a daughter should." And turning on his heel, he departed in cold anger.

Hale duly kept his promise and went away, leaving the girl to her own devices. But so clever a man should have known that the punishment—as he deemed it—was no punishment at all. He had never been a father to Lesbia in the accepted sense of the word, and she had but small affection for him. Alone with Tim, she was much happier than when in Mr. Hale's chilling presence, and preferred his room to his company. Also, he was really playing into her hands, as she wished to be alone in order to see Maud and bring her to reason. It was not Lesbia's wish to call again at Henley, as she thought that she could deal better with Miss Ellis when she was on her native heath. Therefore, now that Hale was out of the way, and she was free to do what she desired, she set to work to concoct a plot whereby to bring Maud Ellis to the cottage at Marlow.

To this end she wrote a letter stating that she and George were to be married shortly, and that Miss Ellis's scheme had failed. This artful epistle she posted to Henley, hoping that if Miss Ellis was in London it would be forwarded to her there. She felt certain—since, being a woman, she knew a woman's nature better than a man could know it—that Maud would seek an interview and come to Rose Cottage. Of course there was the chance that Maud might first interview Walker, and then learn the falsity of the statement. But in that case George would come to learn the truth, and then she could tell him what Canning had dis-

covered. In fact, owing to the skilful way in which Lesbia played her one trump card, she was certain to bring to the cottage either Maud Ellis or George Walker: and whichever came, she was prepared to deal with the situation. All the same, she hoped that Maud would be the one to put in an appearance, as, if she could silence her, she could then call at the Medmenham cottage and explain to her lover the reason why she had dismissed him. Accordingly, when the letter setting the trap was posted, Lesbia sat down to think over the behaviour of Walker.

It puzzled her that he should so tamely accept his dismissal. On the face of it she had treated him cruelly, and had given no reason for abruptly breaking off the engagement. All the same, she considered, woman-like, that he should not have acquiesced too readily to her proposal that they should never meet again.

But she forgot that George was a proud man, and that the sole reason he could assign for her dismissing him was the fact that he was suspected of robbery. If she believed him guilty—George, as she might have thought, would have argued in this way—and had not sufficient love to stand up for him, then she was not worthy of the worship he bestowed on her. But Lesbia did not think thus. She only knew that she had sent George to the right-about and that he had gone away without looking back for a single moment. This was not as it should be, said the woman within her, and therefore she secretly felt annoyed with Walker for his too ready obedience. It can hence be seen that Lesbia Hale was intensely feminine. Perhaps on that account George loved her the more, since the unexpected in woman is always what lures the man.

However, think what she would, and argue as she might, the fact remained that Walker kept away from Rose Cottage, and that she had not sufficient courage to face her lover when under the wing of his mother. Lesbia missed the golden days of wooing dreadfully, and in their absence was anxious to carry on her counterplot, if only to fill in the time. Besides, there would be a considerable amount of pleasure in beating Miss Ellis with her own weapons. It was therefore a happy day to Lesbia that brought the stockbroker's

niece into the trap, as this time the biter was about to be bitten. And Lesbia, being a woman and dealing with a woman, determined to show no mercy since Maud had shown none. Besides, the two were fighting over a man, and so reverted to the ethics of cave life and pre-historic struggle.

Within four days of the posting of the letter, Miss Ellis arrived and was shown by Tim into the tiny drawing-room. It was empty, as Lesbia had seen her rival coming, and therefore had departed to change her frock. Also she hoped to make Maud lose her temper by enforced waiting, knowing that, if she did, there would be less difficulty in dealing with her. Unsophisticated as Lesbia was, she instinctively knew how to fight. Her tactics were correct, for when she entered spick and span and smiling into the drawing-room, she found Maud fuming restlessly, and quite ready to pick a quarrel on the score of uncivil treatment.

"I have been kept waiting," said Miss Ellis in a Louis XIV. tone, and putting up a lorgnette to glare at her much too beautiful rival.

"I am so sorry," responded Lesbia politely. "But I was not dressed to receive anyone, and your visit is unexpected."

Maud laughed contemptuously. "You knew that I would come," she declared with conviction. "You have been looking out for me every day."

"*You* say so," said Lesbia, still graciously, for since the last interview at Henley she had changed her tactics with Miss Ellis. "Will you not be seated? This chair is most comfortable; it has its back to the light."

"I don't need to sit with my back to the light," flashed Maud indignantly.

"Oh, I beg pardon, but from that lorgnette I thought that your eyes might be weak. Sit here, then, in the full warmth of the sunshine."

But Miss Ellis knew better than to let the searching light reveal her age too clearly to her hostess. "I'll sit here," she declared abruptly, and came to rest on the sofa.

"That's right," said Lesbia caressingly. "It's a nice shady corner."

Maud bit her lip, knowing perfectly well that Lesbia was casting a reflection on her age. But having taken the seat she could scarcely leave it without laying herself open to further pointed remarks, so she remained where she was and came to the object of her visit at once. "What do you mean by writing me this letter?" she demanded, producing the epistle of her hostess.

"I mean to show you that your plot to part George and myself has failed."

Miss Ellis crushed up the letter savagely. "Has it," she inquired, "seeing that you have broken your engagement?"

"How do you know that?"

"Mrs. Walker told me. And very glad she is, I can tell you. Mrs. Walker is an old friend of my uncle's and has known me for years. She wants George to marry me. She told me so only a few days ago."

"As if it mattered what she said!" retorted Lesbia contemptuously.

"She is George's mother."

"No one denies that."

"And as he is her son, he should obey her."

"Even when she wants him to marry a woman he cares nothing for."

"George does care for me," cried Maud, a deep flush overspreading her face even to the roots of her sandy hair. "I admit that when he was engaged to you, he would not look at me. But now that you have thrown him over so cruelly, he has turned to me for consolation."

"I don't believe it," said Lesbia quickly.

"You must, you shall," snapped Miss Ellis, very much in earnest. "Look here, this sort of thing won't do."

"What sort of thing?"

"This enmity you have towards me. I don't know why you are behaving so exasperatingly," wailed Maud plaintively. "When you came to Henley, it was the first time we met, and for your father's sake I was anxious to make a friend of you. But you were so rude and so silly that I could not. But I am willing to make every allowance for your want of training, and so I have come here to ask you to be friends."

"Oh, I don't mind, provided you will leave George alone."

"I sha'n't, so there! I love him."

"So do I. And as he loves me I have the prior claim."

"But you have broken your engagement and so have left the field open to me. Don't be a dog in the manger."

"I am not. I love George and I have always loved him. I sent the letter I did because of what my father told me. You lured George into a trap, and—as you said yourself at Henley—you can get him arrested. Because of your attitude I was compelled to dismiss him, or see him ruined."

Miss Ellis put up her lorgnette with an air of triumph. "You have stated the case accurately, save for one remark," she declared. "I *can* ruin George Walker, and I shall do so unless he marries me. But I did *not* lure him into a trap. I merely took advantage of circumstances."

"Which you knew existed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What I say," retorted Lesbia, keeping her eyes on Maud's face. "You appointed that place and that hour of meeting in order to implicate George in a robbery which you knew was about to take place."

Miss Ellis sprang to her feet with a white face and trembling hands. "You go too far," she said, in a suffocating voice. "Why should I?—Why should I? Oh," she stamped, "your remarks are infamous."

"They are true."

"It's a lie! they are not true. I had no idea that my uncle's strong-room was to be robbed of those jewels on that night and at that hour. If I had known I should have prevented the robbery."

"Mr. Tait would not have thanked you for doing so," replied Lesbia meaningly.

"Are you mad?" gasped Maud, and her face became a dull brick-red.

"No," answered Lesbia drily, "I am merely well-informed."

"Informed of what?" Miss Ellis moistened her dry lips.

"That Mr. Tait wanted money to tide over a financial crisis, and arranged to have the jewels stolen, so that he could sell them secretly."

"It's a lie—a lie!" cried Maud again, and the perspiration broke out on her quivering face; "my uncle is a wealthy man: every one knows that. If he wanted money he could have sold the jewels openly—they were his own."

"You forget the insurance at Lloyd's."

Maud dropped on to the sofa as though she had been shot. "The insurance?"

"Yes. Mr. Tait insured those jewels for something like twenty thousand pounds, and so had them stolen. Certainly he could have sold them openly, as you say, but then he would have got only half the money he requires."

"Half the money?" Maud gasped again, and suddenly looked double her age.

"Of course—twenty thousand pounds. By insuring the jewels and having them stolen, he will gain the proceeds of the sale he has arranged with the thieves, besides the twenty thousand from the insurance."

"You dare—to—accuse—my—Oh!" Maud jumped up fiercely and stamped angrily, "it is ridiculous; what proof have you of this absurd tale?"

"I have absolute proof," said Lesbia quietly and rising in her turn. "Mr. Canning—The Shadow—who watched me here at my father's request, found out what I say and, if necessary, he can prove the truth of what he found out. And he will, at my request, if you do not promise to leave George alone and swear that you will not accuse him of a crime of which—as you knew all the time—he is innocent."

But Maud heard only half this speech. "Canning, The Shadow," she muttered, "do you mean Captain Sargent's valet?"

"Yes. I nursed him through an illness, and he has shown his gratitude to me by discovering your uncle's plot, and proving your knowledge of it. I can prove what I say with Canning's assistance, and I shall do so, unless you promise to do as I have asked you."

Maud buttoned her jacket with trembling hands and moved towards the door hastily. "You are talking

“rubbish,” she muttered in a thick voice. “I refuse to talk of the matter. It is too silly. But,” she faced round, “I shall tell my uncle, and he shall have you put in gaol.”

“He will be in gaol himself,” retorted Lesbia calmly. “As soon as you leave this house, I shall arrange with Mr. Canning to go to the police and state what he told me.”

“You would not dare.”

“Yes, I would, unless you swear not to accuse George and promise to leave him to me. I said that before : I say so again, and for the last time.”

“It’s a——” Maud was about to say that it was a lie for the third time, but the word died away on her lips. Whether Maud was cognisant of the plot to steal the jewels Lesbia could not say, as she made no remark on this point : but her very silence showed that she was in the business. Lesbia’s attitude left her no alternative but to make terms, since if she left the house there was every danger that her uncle might be arrested. “If I do what you ask, will you hold your tongue ?” Maud demanded faintly.

“Then you admit that what I say is true ?” countered Miss Hale.

“No,” almost shouted Miss Ellis, “I do not. Still, mud sticks however wrongly thrown, and I do not want my uncle to suffer through me. As to Canning, oh, my uncle will deal with him, I promise you. Not a word. I agree to all you ask—I must. I shall not accuse George : I shall leave him to you and,” she leaned forward with a snarl, “I shall bring misery on you at the eleventh hour.”

“I defy you,” retorted Lesbia with scorn.

“Very good.” Maud smiled in an evil way. “We shall see who wins the dangerous game you are playing. I——” She broke off abruptly and left in haste.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. WALKER'S VISIT

THE meeting of the two girls who loved George seemed destined to end abruptly. On the first occasion Lesbia

had broken short the interview at Henley, and on the second Maud had hastened away from Rose Cottage. Lesbia wondered that she had not remained to talk further, and was rather anxious when she remembered that Maud had left with a threat on her lips. Miss Ellis was clever and cunning and reckless, and in one way or another might work mischief. Not that Lesbia saw any chance of her doing any, since she knew too much for Maud's peace of mind. Without doubt what Canning had discovered was true, else Maud would not have surrendered so easily. Lesbia thought until she was weary about the matter, and especially how Canning could have discovered the truth so speedily. She would have asked him point-blank in spite of his prohibition, but that he was in London. And as yet he had not written to tell where he was hiding.

However, as things stood, there was no doubt that Maud would keep her promise, and that George was safe. On the day after the stockbroker's niece had paid her visit, Lesbia wrote a long letter to Walker, and detailed all that Canning had discovered and also narrated its effect on Maud Ellis. Further, she gave George to understand how she had been compelled to write the letter of dismissal, and ended up with a fond wish that her lover should come and see her at once. When this letter was posted Lesbia began to dream of Walker's speedy return, and haunted the garden in order to see his boat coming swiftly down the river.

But the boat never came, nor did any letter from George. Day after day Lesbia watched the stream: watched also the postman, but in every case she was disappointed. Walker must have received the letter, else it would have been returned through the Dead Letter Office, so it was strange, seeing how she had explained matters, that he did not appear. Or at least he might have written. The girl, wearying for love, grew peaked and wan, much to the distress of Tim, who could not understand. Finally, Lesbia told him the whole story, and sent him over to the cottage at Medmenham to see if Walker had received the letter. Tim returned somewhat downcast.

"Master Garge has been in London these six days," said Tim, "and the mistress—his blissid mother—"

towld me she'd sint the letter to him. He's got it, me dear, but the divil knows why he doesn't write ye the scratch av a pen. Augh, me dear, nivir trouble him again. Sure, there's more fish in the say nor ivir come out av that same."

"George is the only man in the world for me," said Lesbia firmly, although the tears were in her eyes, "and I'll never give him up until I hear him say that he loves another. This is Miss Ellis's work."

"Och, murder, me dear, it's a baste she is entoirely. But from what ye towld me, miss, ye drew the teeth av her."

"She went away with a threat," sighed Lesbia dismally. "She can't force my George to marry her now; but evidently she can prevent his returning to me as I want him to. Oh, Tim, what am I to do now?"

"See Masther Garge and ask him plain, miss."

"But I have not the money to go to London and besides, I do not know where George is stopping," protested Lesbia, wringing her hands.

"See his ould mother, the saints be good to her! for an iceberg she is," suggested Tim after a pause. "Sure, she'll tell ye where he is, me dear."

"No, Tim, no. Mrs. Walker hates my father, and would rather die than see her son become my husband."

"Hates the masther, is ut?" muttered the crooked little man frowning. "And if so, me darlin' heart, why shud she come to see him?"

"Come to see him!" echoed Lesbia, staring; "why, Mrs. Walker has never been to see my father in her life. I understood from George that she hated my father. In that case she will never come here. If she did come," sighed Lesbia, "I might soften her heart so that she might be on my side. I am sure I could win her over."

"Well, Miss Lesbia, ye can but try, for the ould woman is coming here to-morrow afternoon to see the masther."

"But he's away, Tim."

"Sure, miss, he sint me the scratch av a pin sayin' he was coming back this very day. I towld the ould woman, whin she axed me, so she's coming to have a talk wid him. An' the divil will make a third wid them

two," muttered Tim crossing himself, "saints kape us from harm!"

Lesbia was much astonished at this news, as Mrs. Walker had never been to Rose Cottage before, and moreover—on the word of her son—she both despised and hated Mr. Hale. The girl wondered if the visit had anything to do with the letter she had lately written to George. Perhaps Maud's threat had meant that she would enlist Mrs. Walker on her side to stop the marriage, since Maud herself, for obvious reasons, was powerless to do so. But then, in any case, Mrs. Walker disapproved of the marriage, so there was no need for Maud to interfere. Also, if the letter had been forwarded to George in London—and Lesbia saw no reason why it should not have been forwarded—he must have received the same. If so, why did he not reply, seeing that she had completely exonerated herself, and was anxious to renew the engagement which for George's own sake she had been forced to break? Poor Lesbia thought over these questions until she was weary and her head ached, but she could find no reply. The only thing to be done was to wait until the formidable Mrs. Walker arrived: then a few minutes' conversation with her might reveal the reason of George's strange behaviour.

Mr. Hale duly returned, and seemed even angrier and more sullen than he had been before he went away. He scarcely spoke to his daughter, and several times he looked at her with positive dread in his usually cold eyes. It appeared as though he considered Lesbia as a careless child with a box of matches, who might at any moment set the house on fire. Lesbia had a feeling that he was terribly angry with her, and yet that this anger was mixed with a certain amount of dread. However, he contented himself with looking daggers, and to avoid further disturbances she did not ask him any questions. But the house was very uncomfortable. Then at breakfast next morning, on the day when Mrs. Walker was expected, Hale surprised the girl by announcing an invitation.

"I saw Lord Charvington when I was in town," said Hale, keeping his pale eyes on his plate. "For some reason he chose to remember your existence."

Lesbia gasped, and wondered if Charvington had told her father of the money she had borrowed. In that case Hale would question her as to the use she had made of it, and then her counterplot with Canning would come to light with disastrous results. But Hale's further conversation made it plain that Charvington had said nothing about the loan.

"He asked how you were," pursued Hale softly, and still keeping his eyes on his plate, "and if you had grown up a pretty girl. He hasn't seen you for a long time, remember. Considering how badly you have behaved, Lesbia, I spoke better of you than you deserved, so Charvington—prepare for yourself a surprise—has asked you to stop at his country house. He told me that his wife would send you the invitation."

"It is very good of him," said Lesbia faintly. "But I really do not want to go, father."

Hale looked up with a scowl. "Always opposition," he grumbled. "You *shall* go, child. If you won't marry Sargent, there will be a chance of your making a good match when under Lady Charvington's wing. She has daughters of her own, too, so you will have a very good time."

"Why should Lord Charvington ask me?"

"I can't say. . . . He suddenly seems to have remembered your existence. Of course, as my daughter you are related to him. However, the chance of a visit at such a country house is a very good one for you, so get ready to start when the invitation comes. Do you want any frocks, or——"

"No. I have everything," said Lesbia, rising; "after all, perhaps the change will do me good, and I should like to see a little of the world."

"You will see plenty of it with Charvington and his wife. They are a gay couple, and entertain largely. They are at their country seat near Maidenhead for a week; but if you play your cards well Lady Charvington may take you to London for the rest of the season."

Lesbia nodded and went into the garden. Here she sat on the bench under the chestnut, and thought over the glittering prospect which was now open to her. She loved George and was contented with the quiet life, provided he shared it with her. But as he was

absent and was behaving so very strangely, she thought that it would be best to plunge into society if only to forget her aching heart. And if George would not marry her, it might be that she would meet with some other man, who would take her away from the uncomfortable life with her father. In her own heart Lesbia knew that she could love no one but George Walker. Still, she could not force him to marry her, and he appeared to have accepted her letter of dismissal as final, in spite of the second epistle stating why she wrote the first. The poor girl felt very sad and very lonely, and her tears rained down, salt and bitter, as she sat a solitary figure under the glorious tree. The black-bird was piping again, as he had done when George proposed; but it seemed to her ears that the song was now sad. But that probably was mere fancy.

At one o'clock Lesbia returned to the cottage, wondering why all these troubles had come upon her. It really seemed as though Tim's idea about the bad luck of the cross was true, for ever since she had bestowed it on her lover there had been nothing but sorrow and mystery. Even George had not escaped misfortune, since he had been assaulted and robbed, and had lost his situation through being accused unjustly of a crime he had never committed. But Lesbia was a reader of fairy tales, and remembered that the prince and princess always have much grief before peace and joy arrive, so she hoped that in some way—she could not see how—the bad luck which was upon her and George would pass away, leaving them married and rich and happy. But, at present, it must be confessed that there did not appear to be much chance of such good fortune.

"The ould woman has come this very minit," whispered Tim, meeting the girl at the back door. "I've put her in the parlour, but the masher is out."

"My father is certain to come in to luncheon," said Lesbia hurriedly.

"Av coorse he is," muttered Tim. "A mighty dainty man he is fur the inside av him. But she's axing for you, miss, and——"

"I'll go to her," interrupted Lesbia; "meanwhile, Tim, lay another place at the table. I daresay Mrs. Walker is hungry."

With these instructions Lesbia sought the small parlour, and entered to find it occupied by a modern Lady Macbeth. Mrs. Walker clothed in rich but funereal-looking garments of the deepest black was seated majestically on the sofa. Without rising she raised a pair of piercing eyes to look at the girl, and a brief expression of surprise flitted across her impressive face. She had scarcely expected to find the girl so beautiful, as she had always taken her son's enthusiastic descriptions with a grain of salt. However, she privately admitted that George was right for once, and she greeted the girl with stiff kindness. And indeed it was hard even for a lady of Mrs. Walker's hard nature to be angry with Lesbia, who looked such a child, and who behaved so sweetly.

"I am very glad to see you," said Mrs. Walker, looking anxiously into the girl's delicate face. "You remind me of someone who—no, I can't recall of whom you remind me. Still—" she searched anxiously—"you are very like someone I knew."

"Perhaps my mother," Lesbia ventured to remark. "My late nurse, Bridget Burke, told me I closely resembled my mother."

"I never met your mother," said Mrs. Walker, dropping Lesbia's hand quickly and becoming stiffer than ever. "Your father and I were never friends, my dear. I should not be here to-day, save that I have come to ask him about some business connected with money I expect to inherit. Also," added Mrs. Walker unexpectedly, "I wanted to see you. George had talked much of you, my child, and seems to have loved you greatly. I can't blame him, and the wonder is that he should give you up."

Lesbia, clasping her small hands, sank into a chair, her face white and her eyes widely open. "George has never given me up," she said faintly. "I wrote and told him why I was forced to send him the first letter, and——"

"Yes, yes!" Mrs. Walker waved a beautifully-gloved hand. "I was in London the other day—in

fact I took your letter to George. He showed it to me and told me everything."

"And what did you say?"

Mrs. Walker's deep black brows drew together. "Of course the whole thing is rubbish," she said harshly, "and only a love-sick girl like Maud Ellis would act in that way. I suppose much must be forgiven her, as she really loves my son. But after her behaviour, I shall never consent to her marrying him. No! no! That would never do. Especially, now that we know her uncle is such a rogue. I wanted George to tell the police, but he refused."

Lesbia cared very little for the fate of Tait. What she much desired to know was her own. "You said that George has ceased to care for me," she remarked with a pale smile. "I don't understand."

Mrs. Walker gave her a pitying look. "Nor do I, now that I have seen you, my dear. I don't like your father—I never did, and I would rather have died than have seen George marrying his daughter. Your looks and nature have made me change my mind. There is nothing of your father about you. Had I seen you before——" Mrs. Walker broke off and shook her stately head. "But it is too late. George will not renew the engagement."

"Oh, I can't believe that," cried the girl, weeping and trembling.

"Strange!" muttered the elder woman; "you have been quite a heroine in clearing George's character, for which I am greatly obliged to you, yet here you are crying like a schoolgirl."

"I love him so much: I love him so deeply."

"My poor child, it is the fate of women to have their hearts broken. I do not know why George still refuses to renew the engagement in the face of your letter, but he does. Here," Mrs. Walker took an envelope out of her bag and handed it to the shaking girl, "you can read his decision in his own handwriting. He asked me to give you this."

With great delicacy she turned away her head, while Lesbia tore open the envelope with shaking hands. There were only a few lines, but these intimated plainly that George had accepted his dismissal, and would

not seek to renew the engagement. "I love you still, my dearest," wrote Walker in conclusion, "but Fate wills that we must part for ever." Then there were a few tender words, and then the epistle ended abruptly, as though the writer could not trust his emotions. Lesbia read the lines, folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope, which she put in her pocket. Her eyes were dry now, and her white face was flushed with colour. With a deep sigh she touched the elder woman on the shoulder. "I understand," she said calmly.

Mrs. Walker, whose sympathies—remarkably in so cold a woman—were now entirely with Lesbia, grew snappy to conceal her emotion. "I don't," she said acidly, "and when George returns to Medmenham I shall have an explanation with him. He's a fool."

"No," said Lesbia, her face growing even a deeper red. "Can't you see that George is only acting in this way to save me?"

"To save you from what?" asked Mrs. Walker shortly.

"I don't know. I can't say," Lesbia spoke more to herself than to her visitor. "But I feel sure that George wrote this letter as I wrote my first one to him. I wrote to save him, and now he refuses to renew our engagement to save me. I don't understand, still—oh, I am sure that everything will come right. I trust in God."

"You do well to do so," said Mrs. Walker gravely, "for only He can help you, my child. I am thoroughly puzzled, and know not what to say."

"Say nothing: do nothing," cried Lesbia eagerly. "Things will work out to a happy end in their due time."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am certain."

"Then," said Mrs. Walker grimly, "you must have a sixth sense which I do not possess. However, I am glad that you have not given way to hysteria. You are a brave girl, and I would rather have you for my daughter-in-law than I would anyone else in spite of your father. There,"—Mrs. Walker bent forward and actually kissed the girl's lips—"that shows I mean what I say."

"Oh!" Lesbia returned the kiss, blushing divinely, "George said that you hated me, and——"

"How could I hate a girl I had never seen?" snapped Mrs. Walker ashamed of her momentary humanity. "I hate your father, and—well there, say no more about the matter. I hope with all my heart that things will turn out well for you and George, as you appear to think they will. Meanwhile, while we are waiting for your father, tell me about the amethyst cross."

Lesbia started to her feet in astonishment. "The cross!" she echoed. "I have lost it. You know that I gave it to——"

"Yes! Yes!" Mrs. Walker waved her hand impatiently. "I know about the robbery and how no one can find the cross. It must be found, nevertheless. But I wish to learn exactly how it came into your possession. George told me something about the matter, but, like a man, he told it very badly. For this reason I have come to see you as well as Mr. Hale, whom I detest," added Mrs. Walker severely. "Where did you get the cross?"

"From my mother. That is, the cross belonged to her. She left it to my nurse, Bridget Burke——"

"Where is she?"

"Dead. She died some time ago."

"Unlucky," muttered Mrs. Walker with a dark look. "Well?"

"My mother told Bridget to give it to me, and to tell me that I was never to part with it save to the man I loved. Then you know"—Lesbia blushed again—"I gave it to George."

"Yes. I know of that and of the loss. I said so before. But how did the cross come into your mother's possession?"

Lesbia shook her head. "I really cannot tell you."

Mrs. Walker frowned again, and turned her steely eyes towards the door. Her quick ears had caught a soft footfall, and her quick eyes had seen the half-open door move. "Come in, Mr. Hale," she said loudly, "we are saying nothing which you cannot hear."

Hale, who apparently had been listening, entered, looking perfectly cool and composed. "The cross did not belong to Lesbia's mother," he said quietly, but the look in his eyes as they rested on Mrs. Walker was not pleasant.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FAMILY LAWYER

LESBIA uttered an exclamation when she heard the astonishing remark of her father, and started to her feet. But Mrs. Walker, grimly silent, kept her seat and glared, like Medusa, on the new-comer. If she could have turned him into stone she would willingly have done so, as could be seen from the expression of her hard eyes. Hale, perfectly cool, in spite of the insulting speech which she made, took a chair and looked at her with deliberate insolence. Also deliberately he reverted to her insult.

"I was just passing along to the dining-room," he explained slowly, "when I heard voices and your last question. I entered at once and was not eavesdropping, as you are pleased to say."

"There is no need to excuse yourself," said Mrs. Walker tartly, "for——"

Hale crossed his legs and leaned back. "In my own house I think not."

"—For I don't believe a word you say," she finished harshly.

"Naturally you would not," rejoined Mr. Hale smoothly; "you were always a hard and suspicious woman."

Mrs. Walker moved her hands restlessly, and her eyes gleamed fiercer than ever. "You know better than that," she muttered. "Take your mind back thirty years."

"Willingly," said Hale with great promptness. "Do you wish us to speak of the past in Lesbia's presence?"

This time he scored, for Mrs. Walker winced. "There is no need for the child to hear old stories," she remarked, with suppressed passion. "Let us discuss what I have come to see you about."

"The cross?"

"Oh," she flashed scornfully, "I thought you were not eavesdropping?"

"I admitted that I heard your last question," said Hale, with a shrug, "but you never would listen."

"I am listening now. Say what you have to say."

"I have said all that I intend to say, Mrs. Walker. The amethyst cross did not belong to Lesbia's mother."

The girl uttered an exclamation; she was lost in astonishment. "But, father," she remonstrated, "Bridget told me on her death-bed——"

"What she told you was what I instructed her to say," interrupted Hale imperiously. "But your mother—my wife—never possessed such an ornament."

"Lesbia looked at him doubtfully. Of late, she had suspected that her father was not above telling a falsehood to serve his own private ends, and in the face of what she knew, it appeared as though he was telling one now—why, she could not conjecture. While she was trying to puzzle out the reason, Mrs. Walker rose and swept across to the window of the drawing-room which looked out into the road. "I don't see him yet," she muttered to herself, and consulted a bracelet watch attached to her left wrist.

"Are you expecting anyone?" asked Hale politely.

"Mr. Jabez, my family lawyer," she replied curtly, and returned to her seat.

Hale raised his eyebrows and looked more gentlemanly than ever; also a trifle dangerous. "You asked him to my house?"

"Yes, because I want to hear all about the cross. Oh, I know well that you do not wish to see Mr. Jabez, Walter, but——"

"You call me Walter," said Hale, and suddenly flushed.

"A slip of the tongue," retorted Mrs. Walker, also growing red. "The time is long past when I could call you so. You are Mr. Hale to me."

"Then why not call me so?" demanded the man coolly.

"I will do so in future," said Mrs. Walker, and bit her lip in silent rage at having given him an opportunity of scoring. "But I know that Mr. Jabez is too well acquainted with the seamy side of your life for you to care about meeting him."

Hale shrugged his shoulders. "He was my family lawyer as he is yours," he answered in icy tones, "and one confesses much to one's lawyer which one would

hesitate to say to others. I can depend upon the secrecy of Jabez as to my misfortunes."

"Oh!" Mrs. Walker laughed scornfully, "you call them by that name."

"It suits them best. As to Jabez, I have no hesitation in meeting him. But I prefer to choose my own visitors."

"You certainly would not choose Mr. Jabez," said the elder woman insultingly. "However, I have taken advantage of your easy-going nature"—she was very sarcastic—"to invite Mr. Jabez to meet me here, so that we may discuss the whereabouts of the cross."

"How can we discuss what we cannot and do not know?" asked Hale, with a contemptuous look. "You are still the same woman, Judith, headstrong and——"

"Don't call me that name!" she said sharply.

"A slip of the tongue merely, such as you made just now," sneered Hale. "But all this is very unpleasant for Lesbia. Don't you think that while we quarrel she had better leave the room?"

Mrs. Walker drew Lesbia down on to the sofa beside her, and retained the girl's hand within her own. "No," she said sternly, "I am not going to quarrel with you, Mr. Hale. Besides, I wish Lesbia to be here, so that she may hear somewhat of the past."

"Why should she?" asked Hale hastily.

"I want her to marry George."

"You—want—her—to—marry—George," repeated Hale astonished, "my daughter!"

Mrs. Walker looked at him straight. "You may well be surprised," she said quietly, "especially as you know through my son that I was set against this marriage, and with good reason let me remind you, Mr. Hale. But now that I have seen Lesbia"—she drew the girl closer—"I see no reason why the sins of the father should be visited upon the child. Lesbia shall be my dear daughter, and I welcome her with joy."

"I have something to say to that. She shall never be your daughter-in-law, since it is better to be explicit as to relationship."

"We'll see about that."

"Quite so. You are a clever woman, Judith, but I am also a clever man."

"Oh!" Mrs. Walker winced again at his using her Christian name. "We had better not begin about your qualities. Lesbia would certainly have to leave the room then."

"Don't shame me in the presence of my child, madam," said Hale thickly, and the veins on his forehead began to swell with anger.

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Walker with a careless laugh, "I forgot how you have deceived her into thinking you an angel."

Hale suddenly rose, and walked to the window. He was in a furious rage and was trying to keep himself cool, since he knew that any loss of temper would give Mrs. Walker an advantage which he did not intend her to gain. She sat quietly smoothing Lesbia's hand, with glittering eyes, quite ready to continue hostilities as soon as her enemy recovered his breath. Lesbia herself remained passive, wondering what all the trouble was about. Neither the one nor the other of the disputants hinted sufficient to enlighten her as to the reasons why they were at enmity. Hale certainly might have said something more to the point, as he was rapidly losing control of his temper, but, as he turned from the window, there came a ring at the front door of the cottage. "Here is Jabez," said Hale, coming back to his seat. "I am glad he has arrived, if only to stop your tongue."

"Oh, Jabez knows all that I can say," remarked Mrs. Walker grimly, and became silent.

With wide-open eyes Lesbia sat waiting quietly to see what would happen next. This duel of three—as it appeared to be—was as fantastic as that in which Mr. Midshipman Easy fought. Moreover, the girl was so bewildered by the hints dropped of a disagreement between Mrs. Walker and her father, of which she knew nothing, that she was trying hard to collect her scattered senses in order to take in future events more clearly.

Mr. Jabez announced his presence in the passage by a dry, hard cough before he was introduced to the company by Tim Burke. He was a meagre man of medium height with a bald head, a hatchet face, a pair of eyes the colour of which could not be seen

because of blue spectacles, and a loose figure invested in well-fitting dark clothes. He looked somewhat like a certain type of American, but when he opened his mouth he spoke very precise English. For the rest he seemed unemotional and very much addicted to dry business details.

No one could have called Mr. Jabez an interesting person, but he appeared to know his business and the value of his time, upon which he placed a high price.

"Good-day! Good-day! Good-day!" he said severally to the three people in the room with a little nod to each. "Mr. Hale, I apologise for calling uninvited at your cottage, but Mrs. Walker, who wished for the meeting here, must make my excuses. This is your daughter: a very handsome young lady. I shall take this chair, with my back to the light, as my eyes are somewhat weak. For that reason I wear blue spectacles. Now," Mr. Jabez had gained possession of a comfortable chair by this time, "let us come to business, as I have to return to London within the hour. Mrs. Walker!"

Thus addressed, Mrs. Walker, as grim as Jabez himself, and as impatient of wasting time, spoke to the point. "I asked you here, Mr. Jabez, to meet Mr. Hale, with whom," she added venomously, "we are both exceedingly well acquainted."

"Quite so—quite so," interrupted the lawyer with his dry cough, "but it would be as well to avoid personal remarks. They do no good and take up valuable time. Go on, Mrs. Walker."

"I want to hear what Mr. Hale has to say about the amethyst cross," said the widow with a dark look at her enemy.

"I have nothing to say about it," retorted Hale, nursing his chin with his hand and leaning back with crossed legs, apparently indifferent.

"Pardon me, but you have much to say," remarked Jabez precisely. "So far I merely know—on the authority of Mrs. Walker—that the cross was given to this young lady," he nodded very curtly towards Lesbia, "and that in her turn she passed it to Mr. George Walker."

"That is true," admitted Lesbia, seeing that she was called upon to speak. "I was told by Bridget——"

"Who is Bridget?" interrupted Jabez keenly.

"My late nurse. She is dead."

Jabez shook his bald head. "T'cht! T'cht! T'cht! That is a pity. Go on."

"Bridget told me that I was to give the cross only to the man I loved. I therefore gave it to George. He was assaulted for it on the towing-path, and, as it could not be found upon him, his room at Medmenham was robbed."

Jabez nodded. "Mrs. Walker told me all this," he said quietly. "And the cross has never been found?"

"No!" said Mrs. Walker.

"No!" said Mr. Hale.

"No!" said Lesbia.

"All are agreed," smiled the lawyer drily: "a most unanimous opinion. I understand," he addressed Lesbia again, "that your mother originally owned this cross and gave it to your nurse. Mrs. Walker on the authority of her son, told me as much."

"I understood that the cross had belonged to my mother," replied Lesbia, nervously glancing at her father. "Bridget told me so, when she gave it to me on her death-bed."

"Then she told you wrongly," said Mr. Hale, "and at my request."

"Why?" demanded Jabez, turning towards his unwilling host.

"Because the cross belonged to another woman, and I did not want that known in case someone should claim it."

"Ha!" said Mrs. Walker darkly. "And why did you wish to keep it?"

"I—I—liked the ornament," confessed Hale, hesitating, and quite forgetting the sentimental reason he had given to his daughter as to the desire to keep the cross because it had been the property of his late wife.

Mrs. Walker laughed scornfully. "I believe you know the reason why the cross is so valuable," she snapped.

"Yes, he does," chimed in Lesbia, who was determined to learn the reason of all this mystery. "He

says that if produced it will bring him two thousand a year."

"Lesbia!" Hale jumped to his feet and looked furious. "How dare you?"

"How dare I?" she cried, rising in her turn. "Because you will not trust me, father, and I am in the dark. The cross is mine, and I have a right to know all that concerns it. Does the production of the cross mean gain to my father of two thousand a year?" she asked the lawyer.

"It means that if a certain person produces the cross to me," explained Mr. Jabez, "fifty thousand pounds will——"

"Let me explain," interrupted Mrs. Walker sharply. "Lesbia, the cross is needed to prove the identity of my sister Kate. My father left her the sum of fifty thousand pounds. She eloped with a man of whom he disapproved, and has not appeared to claim the money. We don't know if she is living or dead, and——"

"Ah!" broke in Hale, "this is what George told me."

"Yes," flashed out Mrs. Walker, turning towards him, "and for that reason you know the value of the cross."

"Oh," Hale shrugged his shoulders, "I knew that long ago."

"Then why did you not produce it?"

"Because I thought it was lost. If the cross belonged to your sister Kate, Mrs. Walker, I knew her."

"She was not your wife," cried Mrs. Walker savagely. "You were not the man she ran away with."

"I never said that I was," rejoined Hale coolly. "No. Hear what I have to say. When I was living at Wimbledon with my wife—Lesbia's mother—we one day found a woman unconscious in the snow. My wife, who was a Good Samaritan, revived her and took her in. She died, but before drawing her last breath she told me that she was Katherine Morse——"

"That was my sister's maiden name. But she married the man she ran away with."

"She never told me so," said Hale coolly. "She died in my wife's arms and is buried in Wimbledon cemetery. The cross—as I heard from my wife on her

death-bed—she gave to my wife, saying that if produced to Mr. Simon Jabez it would be worth fifty thousand pounds. My wife gave the cross to Bridget and did not tell me so. When she died I hunted for the cross and could not find it. But that old hag of an Irishwoman possessed it and held her peace. On her death-bed she gave it to Lesbia and told her not to tell me about it. I only became aware of its whereabouts when I saw it in your son's hand after he had proposed to Lesbia. Then it was lost again and I don't know who has it."

"What a strange story!" said Lesbia, "why did you not tell me before, father?"

Hale turned on her viciously. "You were secret with me about the cross, so what occasion was there to tell you? Had you been open I would have had that fifty thousand pounds long ago."

"No," said Jabez, who had been listening attentively, "you were not married to Miss Katherine Morse, and so had no claim to the money."

"I claim it," cried Mrs. Walker triumphantly; "all I wanted to know was whether my sister Kate was dead. Now you have sworn to that, and now that we know she is buried in Wimbledon cemetery, I get the money."

"No," said Jabez again and very drily.

Mrs. Walker rose and turned on him angrily. "You know my father's will," she cried angrily. "One hundred thousand pounds was left equally between myself and my sister. I had my share and my husband spent it. Kate never came to claim her half, so by the will it reverts to the survivor of Samuel Morse's daughters. I am the survivor, so——"

"You go too fast, my dear lady," said the lawyer, "and do not know the will so thoroughly as I do. Fifty thousand pounds, which I hold, was left to Katherine and her heirs. There may be a child or children."

"Kate Morse had no child when she died in my house," said Hale sharply. "I can prove it." He went to the door and called out, "Tim."

In a few minutes, and amidst a dead silence, the crooked little man appeared rubbing his red head. "What's your will, sor?" he asked softly.

"You remember the woman who was taken in at Wimbledon years ago?" questioned Hale impatiently. "The woman with the amethyst cross."

"Ay, sor, I mind that. I wor a bare-futted gossoon thin. Me mother—rist her sowl!—laid out the shroud av her."

"Had this woman a child with her?" asked Jabez promptly.

"No, sor," said Tim unhesitatingly, "she had not. The only child in the house wor Miss Lesbia here."

"That will do," said Hale impatiently, waving his hand, and drawing a long breath, "you can go," and Tim took his departure. "Are you satisfied?" he asked turning to the lawyer.

"No," said that gentleman quietly, "I must have better proof that there was no child. From certain rumours, which I remember hearing years ago, I am inclined to believe that there is a child."

"I believe there was a child," said Mrs. Walker, who had been sitting grim and silent. "Kate wrote to me two years after she eloped with that man that she had a baby and that it was very ill. She did not expect it to live."

"Did she mention the sex of the child?"

"No. She did not, nor did I ever hear from her again. I daresay that man cast her off, or deserted her, and she crawled to Wimbledon to die. But the child must be dead also, so I inherit the money."

"No! no! no! There is not sufficient proof of the child's death," said Jabez, "although it appears we can prove the death of your sister. Then again, I must have the amethyst cross placed in my hands before I can part with the money. It is well invested," added Jabez with a chuckle, "and brings a trifle over two thousand a year. You are correct in your estimate, Mr. Hale, but I doubt if you can claim the money."

"I could if I had the cross," muttered Hale savagely.

"Not even then. If the child, whether male or female, appears with the cross and I can prove that it is the child of Mrs. Walker's sister, then I'll hand over the money. If we can prove the death of the child, Mrs. Walker will get the money."

"And I'll have it!" cried Mrs. Walker, rising in.

dignantly. "I am certain that the child is dead. Kate wrote that it was dangerously ill."

"But not dead," chuckled Jabez, glancing at his watch. "Well, there is nothing more to be said, so I shall take my leave. Good-day! good-day! good-day!" he nodded again to each in turn and vanished as unexpectedly as he had entered. Mrs. Walker looked remarkably angry.

"The money is mine and I'll have it," she said determinedly.

"You must first find the amethyst cross," sneered Hale.

CHAPTER XV

A STARTLING LETTER

AFTER Mrs. Walker's portentous visit to Rose Cottage with her lawyer, things went on quietly for some days. Mr. Hale at first positively refused to speak on the subject of the cross and the fortune attached thereto, as he maintained that it was useless to talk about impossibilities. Then he changed his mind and spoke with extraordinary freedom.

"Nothing can be done until we find the amethyst cross," he said gloomily to his daughter; "when that is produced, the money will be forthcoming."

"But you forget, father, that the cross has to be produced by Mrs. Walker's nephew or niece," said Lesbia, doubtfully.

"She hasn't got one," snapped Hale. "If there was a child, it is dead. I know that no child was brought to my house at Wimbledon by Kate Morse."

"Mrs. Walker said that was her sister's maiden name. Do you know the name of the man she married?"

"Yes." Hale cast a jealous side-glance at his daughter. "It's an old story and a long one."

"Which has to do with Mrs. Walker's enmity against you," persisted Lesbia.

"Yes," said Hale again. "She thought that I had something to do with her sister's elopement. Such rubbish!—as though I could have helped it."

"Why did Miss Morse run away, then?"

"Because of her father. He was a wealthy, old, psalm-singing idiot, who made the two girls wretched. Kate fell in love with a certain friend of mine—I am not going to mention his name—and old Morse told him that he was not to come near the house. Then Kate took the bit between her teeth and ran away with the man. She had a miserable life, I believe, but I saw nothing of her until she stumbled footsore and weary into my house at Wimbledon. The rest you know."

"And the money?" asked Lesbia anxiously.

"You heard all that is to be said on that subject when Mrs. Walker was here," growled Hale, who was more communicative than usual. "But I'll repeat the story, because I wish to make a suggestion."

"What is the suggestion?" asked the girl, who mistrusted the uneasy looks of her father.

"First the story and then the suggestion," he remarked grimly. "Well, it can scarcely be called a story. Samuel Morse, the psalm-singing old ass I told you of, had a hundred thousand pounds, two daughters, and no son. He made a will leaving the money equally divided between them, and after death the money if not used up was to go to their heirs. Judith—Mrs. Walker that is—married a scampish man-about-town, who soon got through all she had and then broke his neck in a steeplechase, leaving Judith with next to nothing upon which to bring up George. Kate, having eloped with the man whose name I don't wish to mention, did not claim her share of the cash."

"If Mr. Morse was so angry I wonder he did not alter his will."

"He would have done so—of that I am absolutely certain," said Hale emphatically—"but he had no time for that. Shortly after he made his will Kate eloped, and the old man died in a fit of rage, before he could give instructions to Jabez, who was his lawyer. Jabez gave fifty thousand pounds to Judith, who by and by married Walker and lost it all through his spendthrift habits. The remaining fifty thousand he invested, and what with the principal and interest it must be a tidy sum by now. At all events it brings in over two thousand a year. Since Kate is dead the money passes to her

child—if she left any, which I do not believe. Failing a child, it reverts by the will to Mrs. Walker.”

“But why need she produce the amethyst cross?” asked Lesbia.

“She need not, as her identity is fully established in Jabez’s eyes. The cross—as I learned from him years ago—was an ornament which old Morse had made for Kate, a kind of religious symbol.”

“Who bears the cross will win the crown,” said Lesbia, remembering the ornament; “or rather, as the motto goes, lose the crown by refusing the cross.”

Hale nodded with a smile of contempt. “Yes! That was old Morse’s idea. He gave the cross to Kate and then she ran away with it and the man who became her husband. Jabez, knowing that the ornament is peculiar, swears that he will need the cross to prove the identity of Kate or of her child, as no one else could possess so odd a trinket. As if it could not be imitated exactly,” ended Hale with contempt.

“The cross might be imitated,” said Lesbia, doubtfully. “But as the poor woman is dead, it will not be so easy to produce a child as hers.”

Hale, with his head on one side, looked at her oddly. “I don’t know so much about that,” he said slowly.

“What do you mean?” questioned Lesbia, seeing that her father had something on his mind.

“Well,” said Hale, pinching his chin and still looking at her as though to hypnotise her mind; “there was no child, as I said. But you were only a baby twenty years ago, born, in fact, only a week before Kate Morse came to my house. Could we not say that you are the child?”

“What?” Lesbia looked indignantly at her father.

“Don’t be foolish,” said Hale testily. “It is not a crime, seeing that the money is there for the asking. Bridget Burke told you that the cross was given to you by your mother. Let it be so, and I can swear and, for your sake, I can get Tim to swear, that you are the long-lost child. The train has already been laid by Bridget’s story—which, by the way, I told her to tell you—so old Jabez will be easy to convince.”

Lesbia drew a deep breath. “I should not think of deceiving and robbing Mrs. Walker.”

"Oh, that's nonsense!" said Hale earnestly. "When she dies the money goes to her son, so that if you marry him you can hand over twenty-five thousand to him, or say one thousand a year. Thus you will be acting honestly towards the Walkers, my dear, and——"

"And dishonestly towards myself," cried Lesbia indignantly. "And what of the remaining one thousand a year, father?"

Hale drooped his eyes suavely. "I take that for arranging that you get the money. Come, Lesbia, what do you say?"

"I decline," she retorted, quivering with indignation. "How dare you, who are my father, make such a proposal? Even if I were the true child, I should not give you one penny."

"Ha!" said Hale bitterly. "I thought so, and thus suggested a wild scheme to try you. I might have known."

"I believe that if I had fallen in with your scheme," cried Lesbia boldly, "you would have arranged to carry it through. You have not the cross, however, and even if I consented——"

"I remember the look of the cross, and so do you. It could have been duplicated, my dear."

Lesbia looked at her father in pained astonishment, and then burst into bitter tears. "Oh, how I wish that I could respect you," she wailed.

Hale lifted his eyebrows. "Don't you?"

"No! How can I, when I find that you are so wicked?"

"I was only trying you," he said hastily. "Though it is true that had you shown a disposition to give me my fair share I might have endeavoured to get you this fortune. But, as it is, I see well that all my pains would be thrown away. You would see me—your own father—starve rather than let me have one penny."

Lesbia dried her tears. "I would have nothing to do with such a wicked scheme, and I only wish I could get away from you. You have never been a father to me, and every day we drift farther and farther apart. When I see Lord Charvington I shall ask him to help me to get a situation as a companion or a nursery governess, and then——"

"Lesbia, you surely would not disgrace me by talking to Charvington in that way?" said Hale, his face growing dark. "Perhaps I have never been affectionate, but then I feel more than I say. And you have always had comfort and all that I could give."

"I have had everything, save a father's love."

"My nature is a reticent one," said her father sullenly. "So it is useless to ask for impossibilities. If you really are unhappy with me, marry George Walker and have done with it."

"And what about Captain Sargent?" asked Lesbia sharply.

Hale shrugged his shoulders. "I can't force you to marry a man against your will, bad father as you say that I am. I have done my best for you, and you persistently regard me with suspicion."

"What you proposed to do just now——"

"Was merely an experiment. Think no more about it, and don't make yourself ridiculous with Charvington. Play your cards well with him and his wife, and you may make a good match."

"I shall marry no one but George," said Lesbia obstinately.

"He won't have anything to do with you," sneered Hale and turned away.

Things being strained in this way Lesbia was sufficiently unhappy, especially as George was absent and silent. She could not understand why, after her explanation, he refused to come back to her. But in the depths of her mind she felt certain that he was acting against his heart's desire, and much in the same way as she had acted when she dismissed him. It was impossible to see him, as he was in London and she did not know his address, and it was equally impossible to write to him. Certainly, as Mrs. Walker was ready to receive her, she could have gone to Medmenham to converse with that formidable lady, but she hesitated to pour out her woes in that quarter. In spite of her sudden friendliness, Mrs. Walker was unsympathetic, and the poor girl longed for some kind breast whereon she could lie and weep and be comforted.

Thus it can easily be guessed that Lesbia hailed with joy the arrival of a brisk little woman who introduced

herself as Lady Charvington. She came in a gorgeous motor car, with much noise and pomp, and was dressed like Solomon in all his glory, so wonderful was her frock. Mr. Hale was within and received her with much deference, which was natural considering that Lord Charvington was his patron. Lesbia was sent for, and duly came down to the tiny drawing-room to be introduced.

"So this is Lesbia," said Lady Charvington, putting up a tortoiseshell lorgnette; "quite a beauty, I declare."

She frowned a trifle when she said this, for her own daughters, in their teens at present, were not beautiful. She herself had no great pretension to good looks, although she made the best of herself in every way. She was as small as Lesbia, but did not possess such a complexion or such a figure, and there was an ill-tempered droop to her mouth which made the girl mistrust her. For Lord Charvington's sake, since he had been so kind to her, Lesbia was anxious to love his wife, and perhaps had she been a plain girl Lady Charvington might have given her an opportunity of exercising such affection. But the looks of Lesbia took her aback as she saw in this delicately beautiful girl a formidable rival, not only to her plain daughters but to herself. For Lady Charvington, in spite of her age and of the fact that she was married, flirted a great deal. However, swiftly as these things passed through her mind, she did not permit them to be revealed by her face, and welcomed Lesbia with well-affected enthusiasm.

"You dear!" she said, hopping up like a bird to peck the velvet cheek of her proposed guest; "why have you hidden yourself for so long?"

"I have been stopping here with my father since I came from school," said Lesbia, trying to overcome a sudden dislike for this smiling vision of small talk and chifion.

Lady Charvington shook a dainty finger at Mr. Hale, who was looking on well pleased at the scene. "You naughty, naughty man," she cried effusively and girlishly, "how dare you keep Beauty shut up in a castle no one ever heard of? But that Charvington spoke

about this sweet thing the other day and proposed to have her over at the Court for a few days, I should never, never have seen her."

"I don't wish to trouble you with my girl, Lady Charvington."

"Oh!" Lady Charvington uttered a little scream of delight, while taking in every detail of Lesbia's looks and costume, "there will be no trouble. We have always plenty of nice boys at the Court, and they will lose their heads over this Sleeping Beauty. For you are that, you know," she added to Lesbia, "whatever the poor dear creature's name may have been. But I have come at my husband's express desire to wake you up, and to find a prince who will kiss you."

"I have already got one," said Lesbia abruptly. "I am engaged!"

Hale frowned, as he thought that she was too candid, but Lady Charvington felt more satisfied than she had been. An engaged girl would not be so dangerous. "Then we must ask your prince over to the Court also," she declared effusively, and kissed Lesbia again. I have brought over the car to take you back to dinner. Get your frocks and frills, dear, and we shall start while the afternoon is yet warm."

"Are you ready to go, Lesbia?" asked Hale, smiling artificially, for, from the look on his daughter's face, he was not quite sure if she approved of the invitation.

But he need not have troubled. Lesbia did not like Lady Charvington, but, being anxious to see my lady's husband and tell him of her troubles—since the sending of the cheque proved him to be a kindly man—made up her mind to overcome her mistrust and travel in the motor-car. "Everything is ready," she said quietly. "I have only one box."

"Oh, but, my dear, I wish you to stay for a week," protested the lady.

"So I understood, and thank you very much," replied the girl with enforced cordiality. "And the one box of clothes will be sufficient."

"Dear me!" said Lady Charvington with a gasp, "what a careful girl you must be! Why, I take five boxes for a week's visit."

"I am not rich enough to do that. Besides," added

Lesbia smiling, "I should only cumber up your motor-car."

"Oh, that is all right. It's a big thing and holds heaps. Have you ever been in one, my dear girl?"

"Lesbia has lived a very quiet life," interposed Hale quickly, "and knows nothing of modern luxury."

"Poor thing!" said Lady Charvington, with a pitying glance. "I hope your prince is wealthy," she added, turning to Lesbia.

The girl smiled. "On the contrary, he is very poor."

"Dear me! I seem to have found a paragon of virtue. But are you not rather foolish, my dear girl? With such a face and such a figure and with my influence you should make a better match."

"So I tell her," cried Hale quickly; he was always on the watch to put in a word; "and she is not really engaged, Lady Charvington. There is some disagreement between Lesbia and Mr. Walker."

"What a horrid name! So plebeian!" cried Lady Charvington.

"George is not plebeian," said Lesbia, colouring hotly, "his father was the Honourable Aylmer Walker."

"Lord Casterton's third son," said the visitor, nodding. "Yes, I have heard of him from my brothers. He was rather wild, was he not?"

"Really, I don't know."

"There is no chance of his coming in for the title—your George, I mean," prattled on Lady Charvington, "as Aylmer Walker's two elder brothers have both heaps and heaps of children. I rather think that Aylmer was the black ba-ba of the family. Well, there, I'm talking scandal, a thing of which I highly disapprove. Go and get your things on, dear, and tell your man to put your box on the motor. Wilkins will help him. He's the chauffeur—not at all a bad driver, but oh, so dreadfully reckless. Be prepared to go like the wind, my dear."

Lady Charvington babbled on in this fashion with bird-like glances here and there, taking in every detail of the room. She knew that Hale was a poor relation of her husband's, and indeed had received him twice or thrice at The Court near Maidenhead. But this was the first time she had seen his daughter and, but

for the express command of Lord Charvington, she would not have asked her over. There was some comfort in the fact that the girl's affections were engaged, but all the same, such beauty, whether free or bound, would prove dangerous. "I trust she won't interfere with my men," thought Lady Charvington as she smiled sweetly on Lesbia leaving the tiny drawing-room.

The girl summoned Tim to take her box to the motor-car, which was panting violently at the door, and went to her room to put on her hat. She made a desperate attempt while doing so to overcome her dislike to Lady Charvington, as she felt sure that for some reason the little woman was hostile. Lesbia was too unsophisticated to put down the hostility to the fact that Lady Charvington found her exasperatingly beautiful, and was puzzled to think why any hostility should exist. But it certainly was there, and Lesbia detected it immediately. However, as she could see no reason for any such feeling existing between her and a woman who—on the face of it—was doing her a kindness, she fought desperately with her intuition. Still it seemed to her that she was but leaving one abode of trouble to go to another, wherein even more annoying things might happen. And the root of all the worry was the missing cross.

Tim took down the box and then returned to Lesbia's bedroom as she was issuing therefrom. He drew her back mysteriously and produced a letter cautiously from his inner pocket. "This is for you, miss," he declared in a whisper; "it came under cover to me by the midday post, with a scratch av a pin saying Mr. Canning sint it, and 'twas to be given ye at onct."

"Mr. Canning!" Lesbia's face grew eager, and she hastily opened the thin envelope to skim five or six lines written on foreign notepaper. What she read surprised her, and she noted that the address given was in a quiet street in Whitechapel.

"I have heard indirectly," wrote The Shadow, "that you are going some time to The Court, Lord Charvington's place near Maidenhead. If you do, keep a good watch, as two London thieves—the same who robbed Tait's strong-room by Tait's direc-

tions—are about to try to steal Lady Charvington's jewels when everyone is at dinner. The attempt will be made on Thursday evening. I advise you to warn Lord Charvington, but tell him not to bring in the police, as he will deeply regret doing so.—
Yours always, C."

This mysterious letter, signed with Canning's initial, startled Lesbia. For the moment she felt inclined to go down and tell her father; but on second thoughts and with a discretion far beyond her years, she decided to say nothing until she met her host. It was now Tuesday, and the burglary was not arranged for until Thursday. There was ample time.

"It's nothing, Tim," she said mendaciously, putting the letter away. "Good-bye for one whole week, you dear old thing," and she kissed him fondly.

CHAPTER XVI

REGOGNITION

THE COURT, near Maidenhead, was Lord Charvington's chief country residence on account of its proximity to London. It was a modern mansion built in early Victorian days, and, in accordance with the taste of that period, had no great pretensions to architectural beauty. In fact it might be called ugly, and was a huge staring barrack of a place, quite out of keeping with the beauty of the surrounding grounds. These were of large extent, and so admirably laid out that they made up for the deficiencies of the building, which, after all, was comfortable enough within doors, if its external aspect was uninviting. Modern luxury had made the many rooms very habitable, and the barn—it looked like a barn—was furnished with the magnificence of Aladdin's palace.

Lesbia arriving with her hostess in time for afternoon tea, was speedily introduced to Lord Charvington. There were at least ten guests of fashionable London stopping for a few days and, while Lady Charvington chatted with these, her husband made himself agreeable to Miss Hale. She was very glad to find Charving-

ton so agreeable and sympathetic, for naturally her first plunge into society made her somewhat shy. And her host was particularly attentive, quite in a different way from Lady Charvington's careless hospitality. After a few minutes' conversation Lesbia felt as though she had known him for years, and was soon quite at her ease. In fact, Lady Charvington, at the other end of the room, cast a displeased look in Lesbia's direction, when she heard her laughing so gaily, and saw how her pretty face was wreathed in smiles. Charvington was making a fool of the girl, she thought, and indeed privately deemed it foolish that he had lifted the girl into a circle so alien from her ordinary life, since she had neither the money nor the experience to sustain her new position. However, Charvington had made a point of his cousin's daughter being asked, so Lady Charvington gave way, as she always did to her husband in small things.

Charvington was a tall and somewhat stout man, with a fresh-coloured face and leonine masses of white hair worn somewhat long. He was clean shaven, with merry blue eyes filled with vigorous life, and possessed a strong, calm voice, sympathetic and sweet. His manner was brisk and lively, and more suited to youth than to age. Not that he was so very old, for he certainly appeared as lively as the youngest man in the room. Everyone in the West End knew Lord Charvington, as he was rich and kind-hearted, two things which beget a very agreeable reputation. Many a young man had to thank Charvington for help and advice, and in an unostentatious way he did a great deal of good. When Lesbia talked with him and became acquainted with his personality, she no longer wondered that he had acceded so readily to her request for a loan. The purse of such a genial man was always open to the needy, and very often to the undeserving.

"I am glad you have come over, Lesbia," he said admiringly, as they sat in a quiet corner of the room far from the chattering guests. - "Hale did not tell me that you were so pretty. By the way, you must not mind my calling you by your Christian name. I knew you when you were but a baby, and it is my privilege, as your elderly cousin, to be familiar."

"I am very glad you *are* familiar," said the girl, lifting her eyes to the strong, kind face, "and I cannot forget that you sent me that fifty pounds so kindly, without asking what I wished to do with it."

"Pooh! pooh! That is nothing, child. Who should help you but I? Whenever you are in want of money write to me, and you will receive a cheque by return of post. I am your cousin, you know. And a very bad cousin at that," added Charvington, with sudden energy. "I should have had you here long ago. You must have led a dull life in Marlow."

"No," answered Lesbia quietly, "there was always George."

"Who is George?"

"The man I love."

"Oh!" Lord Charvington's eyes twinkled more than ever. "You are engaged?"

"Yes—and no."

The man looked puzzled. "What do you mean? I don't like riddles."

Lesbia sighed. "It is a riddle, and a very painful one. For that reason I accepted your kind invitation and came over. I want to tell you what I did with the fifty pounds, and also I wish to ask your advice."

"I shall be delighted to give it, but surely your father——"

"My father——" Lesbia checked a scornful remark which was on the tip of her tongue—"my father would take no interest in what I wish to tell you."

Charvington bent his brow and looked at her thoughtfully. "You shall come to the library in the morning, and there we can have a chat," he said. "Only one thing I ask you now; your father does not treat you badly?"

"No," faltered the girl, looking down; she could not betray her father, although he had behaved so ill. "My father is—well enough," she ended lamely.

"Humph!" muttered Charvington, with his eyes still on her face. "Well, well, we shall see! Meantime have some more tea," and he walked across the room to have her cup filled.

No more was said for the time being, but Charvington's kind manner made Lesbia more determined than ever to confide in him. She believed that she had at

length found a friend who would aid her to withstand the tyranny of her father, and who would assist to put things right with her lover. They were crooked enough now in all conscience. Moreover, in any case, she was forced to show him Canning's letter, so that he might provide against the projected burglary. If she told this much she would have to tell all, for only by making a clean breast of it could she be extricated from the mire into which she had sunk, through no fault of her own. All that evening she longed for the morning, so that she might tell her new friend the many difficulties which were making her miserable.

Not that the evening was dull. On the contrary, as the mansion was filled with lively, well-bred people, it was quite a revelation to Lesbia in the way of enjoyment. Everyone seemed to be happy and untroubled by care, which contrasted strongly with the incessant worry which went on within the four walls of Rose Cottage. These society people—outwardly at all events—seemed as careless gods, happy, merry, and gloriously irresponsible. Later in life Lesbia learned what sadness lurked under this frivolous, laughing exterior, but at this time she was quite deceived and thought to herself, "How happy are the rich and well-born!"

Lady Charvington's two daughters—not yet old enough to be presented—were very nice girls, although they were decidedly plain-looking. But they appeared to have none of their mother's jealousy regarding Lesbia's beauty, and made much of her. She found herself laughing and talking and entering into their girlish lives, quite as if she had known them for many years. Lord Charvington seemed particularly pleased that this should be so, and presided over the trio like a benevolent wizard. For the most part Lesbia was with the two girls during her visit, in spite of the attentions paid to her by sundry youths smitten by her beauty. Seeing this, Lady Charvington became much more gracious, and inwardly decided that Lesbia Hale knew her place. All the same, she was a trifle uneasy at the way in which Charvington hovered round the pretty visitor. Not that she cared overmuch for her husband, who was older than she was; nevertheless, she did not like to see him paying marked attentions to anyone else.

On the first evening there was a small dance after a very splendid dinner. Lesbia, in her simple white dress, attracted much notice, but she preferred to talk to Agatha and Lena, Lord Charvington's daughters, and to laugh at their father's mild witticisms. During a lull in the dance there was some singing, and towards the end of the evening an excellent supper. Lesbia retired at midnight, while yet the festivities were in full swing. This was at Lord Charvington's express wish, as he did not approve of youth losing any necessary beauty-sleep. When she laid her head on the pillow and was falling asleep, Lesbia confessed that she had enjoyed herself greatly. If George had only been present the evening would have been perfect.

Next morning, Agatha and Lena woke her early and took her round the grounds. The girls exchanged confidences—chiefly about school life—ran races on the dewy sward, and entered filled with the joy of life to eat a surprisingly good breakfast. Lady Charvington was rather astounded at Lesbia's appetite. So pretty a girl, she decided, should eat less and talk less. But Lesbia, although a fairy in looks, could not live on fairy food, and enjoyed to the full the excellent meal provided by the very capable chef of her host. "Horrid, greedy, pert girl!" thought Lady Charvington, who was all smiles and attention. "I am sure I sha'n't like her!"—quite a needless thought, as she already heartily disliked her visitor for other reasons than because she was pretty. But these reasons Lesbia did not learn for some months. Then they did not matter, as life had changed by that time for the better.

After breakfast, Lord Charvington carried off his pretty little guest to a noble room lined with books, and placing her in a most comfortable arm-chair, took his own seat at his desk. "Now, my child, what is it?" he asked.

"It is rather difficult to begin," faltered Lesbia, feeling if she had the fatal letter in her pocket.

"Not with me, my dear. You know that you can trust me implicitly."

"Yes," said Lesbia, raising her clear eyes to the kind face. "Well then, I shall begin from the time I gave George the amethyst cross."

"What?" Charvington's ruddy face grew pale, and he pushed back his chair with considerable violence; "the amethyst cross!"

"Do you know anything about it?" asked Lesbia, astonished by his change of colour and evident emotion. "It is lost, you know—stolen."

"Who stole it?" demanded the man, mastering himself with an apparent effort.

"Listen," said Lesbia, and related everything from the time George Walker had proposed to the moment of Lady Charvington's arrival at Rose Cottage. But for the moment she said nothing of the letter from Canning. That could keep until she heard what Charvington had to say to the first part of her story. And it may be mentioned that Lesbia spared her father as much as possible, while explaining her difficulties.

After his first violent movement, Lord Charvington listened in dead silence, and his colour slowly returned. With his eyes averted, he heard the whole extraordinary tale without interruption, and only when it was concluded did he speak. Then he gave but small comfort. "I cannot understand what it all means," he said slowly. "I shall see Hale, and doubtless he will be able to explain matters. But have no fear, child, if you love George Walker you shall marry him. I know Mrs. Walker, and I knew her husband. A wild fellow was Aylmer Walker, but not without his good points."

"And you won't let my father have me watched again?" said Lesbia anxiously.

"Certainly not," cried Charvington fiercely. "If I had known that, I would have—but that's neither here nor there. Your father owes me too much to disregard my wishes. I shall see that he leaves you your full liberty and that he consents to your marriage with George. I hope he is worthy of you, my dear—George, I mean," he added wistfully.

"Oh, yes. He's the dearest, sweetest, best——"

"There! there!" Charvington smiled a trifle drily. "I can see that your heart is set upon being Mrs. Walker. Very good. I shall see that George has an opportunity of earning money, so that you can marry him."

— "And the cross?"

"Never mind the cross just now," said Charvington hastily. "I shall have to see your father about that. Later we can talk on the subject. But this Tait," he drummed anxiously with his fingers on the table; "I knew Tait many years ago. He always was a scoundrel, although I did not think he would go so far as to join himself with professional thieves——"

"Oh!" said Lesbia, drawing Canning's letter from her pocket, "I forgot. Read this, Lord Charvington. It's a warning—only don't tell the police."

Her host mounted his pince-nez and read the missive in surprise. His face grew a dark red, and he muttered a word which Lesbia luckily did not overhear. Then he folded the letter and placed it in his pocket without remark.

"You won't tell the police?" said Lesbia again, and still anxiously.

"No," said Charvington, rising, "from what Canning found out before, I believe Tait is in this business also. I don't want for several reasons to make a scandal connected with the man, although he deserves to be gaoled for life. Still, I shall take precautions by having the house watched. Also I must get my wife to put away her jewel-casket in the safe. She is very careless about her jewels, and leaves the casket in her bedroom, sometimes in a drawer or wardrobe, but more often open on the dressing-table. The maid should put it away, of course, but she's a half-blind old creature who was my wife's nurse, and neglects things. But to-day is Wednesday, and the burglary is arranged for to-morrow evening when we dine. I shall see that my wife puts away her jewels to-morrow evening. I shall go to her room and see that they are safe before I go to dinner."

"But why not to-day also?" asked Lesbia anxiously.

"The burglary is not until to-morrow evening, child," said Charvington kindly. "They are safe until then, as they have been safe for years in spite of my wife's gross carelessness and trust in her neglectful old nurse. No, my dear, you have given me a needed warning, so it is no use bothering your head further. To-morrow I shall make all safe. When these two thieves

find that the house is guarded, they will not attempt the robbery."

"Will you warn Lady Charvington?"

"What! and have her fall into hysterics? No. I shall merely see that the jewels are locked up nightly after to-morrow, and have the house watched for a week or so. My wife need know nothing, my dear.

"I shall keep my own counsel," said Lesbia, rising to leave the room, "but I do wish you would have the jewels put away to-night, Lord Charvington."

"Well," he smiled kindly, "perhaps, as you are so anxious, I shall. But, as we know the time and date of the projected burglary, there is no need."

Lesbia went away, comforted to think that Charvington now knew all her troubles, and would help her when it was necessary. Doubtless he would procure George a good situation, and then she could marry her lover. But the emotion of Charvington, when the amethyst cross was mentioned, puzzled Lesbia greatly, as there appeared to be no reason for it. However, she comforted herself with the reflection that—as he had promised—he would explain everything when the appointed time arrived, and went to enjoy her holiday with the two girls. The enjoyment took the form of a picnic and a run down the river on Lord Charvington's fine steam launch.

When the girls were out of the way, Charvington sought his wife and pointed out to her the folly of leaving a case full of rich jewels on her dressing-table. "They might be stolen," he remonstrated.

Lady Charvington was not at all grateful. "You are always making a fuss over the jewels," she said impatiently. "I have left the case in my bedroom for years and I have never lost a single thing."

"That doesn't say you might not lose the lot," snapped Charvington, who found his wife trying even to his kindly nature.

"There's time enough to talk when I do lose them."

"Then it will be too late. I ask you to put them away every night in the strong-room. Bertha can take the case there when she has dressed you for dinner."

"Very well," said Lady Charvington, who was impatient to return to a very interesting book she was

reading. "I'll tell Bertha, though I'm sure if the case is in my bedroom she can look after it well enough."

"Pooh! She's half blind. Why don't you get a better maid?"

"Bertha's been with me all my life, and I shall keep her until she is past work. You have no heart, Charvington," she ended virtuously.

"She's past work now," said her husband, as he stalked from the boudoir.

Nothing more was said, but had Charvington been in the house on that Wednesday evening he would either have asked his wife if the jewels had been put away, or have attended to the matter himself. But during the day he suddenly decided to go up to London in order to see a private detective whom he had employed before on various delicate matters. It would be just as well, thought Charvington, to have this man in the house on Thursday evening. Then, if the two thieves alluded to by Canning did arrive, the man could lay hands on them. Not that Charvington wished to make a public case of the matter, since, as he had hinted to Lesbia, he was anxious to avoid scandal in connection with Tait, whom he shrewdly suspected of having a hand in this new piece of rascality. For this reason he went up to London to engage the private detective, and remained in town for the night. Next day he purposed coming back with his assistant, and then the matter could be settled quietly. Lady Charvington would not lose her jewels, and there need be no trouble—publicly at all events—in connection with Mr. Michael Tait.

All that Wednesday Lesbia enjoyed herself on the river with her host's daughters, in spite of the launch breaking down temporarily on the way back, in consequence of some accident to the engines. Consequently it was not until seven o'clock at night that the three girls arrived at Maidenhead, and it was thirty minutes past when they came to The Court. Lady Charvington, who had been anxious about their non-arrival, expressed herself as annoyed at their failure to be in to dinner, which was at seven o'clock. She sent a message saying that Agatha and Lena were to dine in their school-room with the governess. Lesbia, feeling herself a

culprit—although on the face of it not one of the three was to blame—decided to dine with the girls and to make her apologies afterwards to Lady Charvington. And a very merry dinner they had, for the governess was a charming, middle-aged lady, who made everything very pleasant. And then the love of Agatha and Lena for their newly-found cousin grew with every hour. On the whole, Lesbia enjoyed that schoolroom meal more than the splendid dinner of the previous night. She was the more pleased that she had remained absent, as she was told by the governess that Lord Charvington was away in London.

After that merry meal, Lesbia went to change her dress in order to go down to the drawing-room. Agatha and Lena followed to chatter and help, as they did not like to be separated from their visitor. Lesbia's room was on the first floor, near that of the girls, and on the way the three had to pass the door of Lady Charvington's bedroom. It was closed, but as they passed they heard a shriek of alarm, and, opening it at once, saw one man escaping by the window, and another struggling with Bertha, the ancient maid. Agatha and Lena ran away screaming for help, but Lesbia dashed forward to help the old woman. At that moment the man—who wore a mask—threw Bertha on the ground and ran towards the window. Lesbia caught him before he could fling his leg over the sill, and tore off the mask. Then she uttered a cry of dismay and terror.

“Father!” she shrieked, and dropped down in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XVII

DISGRACE

NEXT morning, Lesbia was sitting in her bedroom, thinking over the terrible event of the previous night. She had remained in a faint for a considerable time, and had recovered consciousness to find herself lying on her bed. At once she had desired to see Lady Charvington, but her hostess sent up a message asking that Lesbia should wait until the arrival of Lord Charvington, who had been wired for. From the somewhat pert

behaviour of the maid who brought the message, the unfortunate girl felt that she was in disgrace, and did not dare to resent it. Having recognised her father in the man whose mask she had torn off, she fancied that the whole household knew of the matter. But in this she was wrong, as she learned when Agatha, the elder of the girls, came by stealth to her room about eleven o'clock at night.

"I don't know what is the matter with mother," said Agatha, speaking in a low whisper and keeping a watchful eye on the door; "she told Lena and I that we were not to see you or speak to you."

"Why?" stammered Lesbia, feeling sick with shame.

"I don't know. I suppose mother is angry at the loss of her jewels. But my father always told her that she would lose them."

"Have they caught the thieves?"

"No. Lena and I screamed, and everyone came rushing up. They found Bertha lying half-stunned on the floor, and you in a faint. The two men had a motor-car at the gate and got away."

Lesbia turned even whiter than she was. "Do they know who the men are?"

"Of course they don't. They wore masks, you know," said Agatha, "but one mask was found on the floor. Bertha said that you pulled it off the man who was struggling with her. Did you know his face?"

"No," muttered Lesbia. The lie choked her, but she could not denounce her own father, evil as he was. "I expect that when I fainted he jumped from the window after his companion, and managed to reach the motor-car. Has your father returned, Agatha dear?"

"No," answered the girl softly, "he is coming back in the morning. Mother has brought in the police from Maidenhead, but I heard her tell the chief man that you were too ill to be questioned until the morning. Mother seemed to be very angry with you, Lesbia. I wonder why?"

"I don't know, dear," said the girl. And indeed she did not. If the names of the thieves were unknown, Lady Charvington could have nothing against her. "But if your mother doesn't want you to speak to me, Agatha, you must go back to bed. When the

morning comes I shall see your mother and ask what is the matter."

"See father," said Agatha, pattering across the room with bare feet; "he is fond of you: he told me so. Mother is always jealous of anyone father likes, and she will only be disagreeable. I waited till Lena was asleep, then came here. But I'll go now," she returned to kiss Lesbia. "Good-night, dear, and don't worry. Everything will be right when father comes back."

Lesbia thought so also. She had implicit faith in Lord Charvington as his daughter had, and knew that he would understand when he heard the truth. But could she tell him the truth? Could she say that the man to whom he allowed the annuity had crept into the house to steal the jewels? And then Canning had said particularly that the two thieves were the same that had robbed Tait's strong-room by Tait's direction. In that case, her father was doubly a villain, as he was not only a thief, but had tried to throw the blame of the first burglary on George Walker in order to bring about a separation between them. Now he had added a second crime to the first, and had robbed his benefactor and cousin at the very time that his own daughter was a guest in the house. Canning must have known of her father's guilt and so, in his letter—for Lesbia's sake no doubt—had advised that the police should not be brought in. But would Charvington keep the affair quiet when his wife had lost her jewels? And in any case would he not send from the house in anger the daughter of such a villain? It was terrible, shameful, disgraceful, and poor Lesbia sobbed herself to sleep at the horror of it all.

Next morning she could eat no breakfast, but after a cold bath to freshen her up, dressed and sat by the window, waiting for Lord Charvington's arrival. At first she was inclined to see her hostess and ask why she behaved so oddly. But the fancy was strong within her that Lady Charvington in some way must have learned the identity of at least one of the thieves, and so was visiting the shame of the father on the head of the innocent daughter. But then Lesbia could not conjecture if this was true. As Lady Charvington had not entered her bedroom until Hale escaped, she could not

have recognised him, and as Hale had escaped, the truth would never become known unless Lesbia spoke. This she did not intend to do, unless to Lord Charvington, whom she could trust. She therefore waited patiently. At all events, as she gathered from Agatha's report, whatever Lady Charvington suspected she certainly had not informed the household, in spite of the demeanour of the pert servant. Nevertheless, the very forbidding of the two girls to see Lesbia pointed to doubts and hatred and knowledge of the worst on Lady Charvington's part.

As Lesbia sat there looking out on the beautiful garden with tear-filled eyes, she recalled many circumstances in her father's life which brought home to her forcibly his wicked vocation. The sordid persons who came by stealth to Rose Cottage must have been thieves and fences who received stolen goods. Her father's mysterious actions and frequent absences were accounted for by the fact, for when away he probably had been robbing with his shameful associates. No wonder he had laughed when George had proposed to leave Tait's office and join him in business. And Tait also was a rogue and a scoundrel, belonging to the gang of which Walter Hale was a member. Sargent might be a thief also—but of this Lesbia could not be certain. Nevertheless, she began to suspect that Canning, *alias* The Shadow, had something to do with the robberies. That would explain why a gentleman would descend to being a spy. Canning was under Hale's thumb and would have to do what he was told to do. Then she recollected how he had stated that for telling her about Tait's scheme he would have to go into hiding. There could be no doubt about it. Canning belonged to the gang and out of gratitude had betrayed his sordid associates.

Thinking thus Lesbia grew sick and faint. The thought of the wickedness that surrounded her made her shiver. How could she expect George to marry her when she was the daughter of a thief? And she would be forced to tell him, since she could not marry him and keep silent upon such an important point. To marry George without telling him the truth would be to place herself in the power of her father. And now,

knowing what her father was, Lesbia felt certain that to put money into his pocket he would not stop short of blackmail. No, she would have to tell what she had discovered to George and to Lord Charvington, and thus in one moment she would lose the only two friends she possessed. Tim remained, and Lesbia knew that, come what might, she could always depend upon the fidelity of the Irishman; she felt sure that Tim was as innocent as herself of this dreadful knowledge which had come to ruin her life. In all wide England there was no more miserable girl than the unfortunate Lesbia, as she sat weeping by the window and bidding farewell to happiness and respectability.

Towards noon a message was brought that Lord Charvington wished to see her in the library, and Lesbia, after washing away all traces of the bitter tears she had shed, descended the stairs. She was pale and worn, but held herself proudly, for, whatever might be known, she was determined to face the worst. Several people were in the hall, and she saw a policeman near the door. But no one looked at her in any way suggesting that the terrible truth was known, so Lesbia entered the noble library with a hope that her father had escaped recognition by all save herself.

Only two people were in the library, Lord Charvington and his wife. The former was walking to and fro with a worried expression on his kind face, but the latter, seated in an arm-chair near the window, looked red with anger and apparently had been engaged in a furious argument: "If you don't tell, I shall," she was saying when Lesbia entered.

"You shall say nothing," said Lord Charvington sternly. "Hold your tongue as you have done. Hitherto you have displayed sense in keeping silence and in silencing Bertha. Continue to behave in that way, and——"

"Here's the girl," snapped Lady Charvington, interrupting as Lesbia came silently into the room and closed the door.

"Why do you speak to me in that way?" asked Lesbia, up in arms at once. Knowing herself innocent she did not intend to stand insult.

"You will soon learn," retorted the other, curling

her lip. "I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself. And after all my kindness too, and my——"

"Silence, Helen," said Lord Charvington imperiously. "How dare you talk to Miss Hale so insolently?"

"Miss Hale," sneered his wife. "Why not call her Lesbia, as you have done?"

"I have every right to; she is my cousin." Lord Charvington made an angry gesture to impose silence on his indignant wife, and turned to the girl, who stood pale and motionless. "My poor Lesbia, don't look so woe-begone. I will stand by you whatever my wife may say."

"What does she say?" asked Lesbia quietly.

"You had better hear her when she is more composed," said Lord Charvington with a glance at his wife, thereby arousing her to fresh fury. "She will probably say something in the heat of the moment for which she will be sorry. Helen, had you not better go and lie down?"

Lady Charvington arose with a red spot burning on either cheek, and her eyes glittered like those of an angry cat. "How dare you speak to me like this in my own house, Charvington?" she cried in a shrill voice. "I don't leave this room until you turn that shameless girl out-of-doors."

"What do you mean?" demanded Lesbia indignantly but with a sinking heart.

"Mean!" screamed the infuriated woman; "I mean that Bertha heard you calling the masked man who attacked you 'Father'! And you cannot deny it. See, Charvington," she pointed tauntingly to the agonised girl, "she dare not deny it. Oh, you—you daughter of a thief; you accomplice of a thief."

"Helen, Helen, be silent."

"I shall not be silent. When Bertha told me the truth I ordered her to hold her tongue until you returned, Charvington. I have held my peace myself, and neither the police nor the servants nor our friends know that his horrid girl is the daughter of a thief. Why you take such an interest in the minx I don't know, but surely after what we have discovered you will pack her off to gaol."

"To gaol! to gaol!" Lesbia drew herself up, pale

but fearless. As Lady Charvington hurled her accusations, the girl's spirit rose to defend herself. After all, guilty as her father might be, she at least was innocent. "How dare you speak to me in this way?" she said again.

"And how dare you face me, you cat?" snarled Lady Charvington, looking much more like a cat herself. "You arrange with your abominable father to rob me of my jewels, you enter my house to——"

Before Lord Charvington could put out his hand to stop her—for he was afraid to think what these two angry women might do—Lesbia glided past him and stood face to face with her enemy. "You lie!" she breathed in such a low, fierce voice that the other woman fell back into her chair with a gasp of fear. "I knew nothing of this. I had no wish to rob you of your jewels."

"Yes you had, and I know why!"

"Explain, then. I dare you to explain."

Lady Charvington cast a swift glance at her husband. "I know what I know."

"You know that I am innocent," said Lesbia, clenching her hands; "I dare you to say that I am not."

"You are your father's accomplice."

"That is untrue," broke in Lord Charvington smoothly. "Lesbia gave me warning that the jewels would be stolen."

"Of course," scoffed his wife triumphantly, "she knew!"

"If I had been in league with my father, should I have given the warning?"

"Yes," said Lady Charvington, rising to confront Lesbia, who had asked the question. "My husband showed me the letter purporting to come from some man in London. It said that the burglary was arranged for Thursday, and by telling my husband that, he thought he might safely leave the house and go to London to engage a detective, while your father robbed the house on Wednesday. It's a well-arranged business."

"I don't know why the burglary took place on Wednesday," said Lesbia steadily; "the letter I gave Lord Charvington is perfectly true. I can't explain further than I have done."

"Because you can't; because you can't," taunted Lady Charvington, "but you shall leave my house in disgrace."

Lord Charvington caught his wife's wrist. "Lesbia shall return to her home this day," he said imperiously; "I won't have her stopping her to be insulted by you. Bertha will say nothing of what she overheard, as I have forbidden her to speak on the pain of instant dismissal. You also, Helen, shall hold your tongue."

"I will do nothing of the sort," breathed Lady Charvington vindictively.

"You shall; I will not permit you to ruin an innocent girl. Knowing that Hale has stolen your jewels, I can get them back, and have already communicated with him."

"The police——"

"The police can do nothing. Hale and his accomplice got away cleverly in their motor-car and cannot be traced. If the jewels are returned intact—which they will be, as I can force Hale to return them—the police will not move any further in the matter, as I can stop them. Then this painful episode will be a thing of the past."

"I want that girl disgraced as an accomplice," said the elder woman, grinding her teeth and pointing towards Lesbia.

Charvington put his arm round Lesbia's waist or she would have fallen. "I shall not allow it, Helen," he said quietly. "Lesbia is innocent. Woman, have you no pity for the poor thing? Surely she is suffering enough already, in finding out that her father is a thief."

"Her father," jeered Lady Charvington insultingly. "Oh, yes, her father," she moved swiftly towards the library door. "If you get back my jewels I shall hold my tongue, for reasons which you may guess, Charvington. But don't let that creature come near me, or I shall—I shall—Oh!" Lady Charvington could scarcely contain herself. "How I hate you—hate you! I wish you were dead, with all my heart and soul, you—~~you~~——"

What she was about to say in her furious anger

Lesbia could not guess. But whatever it was she never uttered the epithet. Charvington suddenly moved towards his wife and, towering above her, glared into her eyes. "If you say another word I'll kill you."

Lady Charvington quailed. "You are quite capable of doing so," she breathed undauntedly; "I'm not afraid of you. But clear my house of that,"—and with a jeering laugh she pointed at the trembling girl and left the room.

"What—what does she mean?" gasped Lesbia, sinking into a chair, her courage all gone. "What have I done? How can I help my father—my father—oh, Lord Charvington!" and she broke down, weeping bitterly.

"Hush! hush!" He stood over her, patting her heaving shoulder. "She doesn't know what she is saying. I'll see that she holds her tongue, and Bertha also. Nothing will ever be known of your father's complicity in this crime."

"But what does it mean?" asked Lesbia, lifting a tear-stained face.

"God knows," muttered Charvington moodily. "I have been mistaken in your father, my dear."

"But—but you don't blame me?"

"No," he declared emphatically, "a thousand times no. My dear, I love you as if you were my own child, and I shall never, never believe any harm of you in any way. I can keep my wife's tongue silent, but I can do no more. You must return to Marlow until such time as I can arrange further about your marriage with George Walker."

"Oh," Lesbia wailed and stretched her arms, "I cannot marry him now. Who would marry the daughter of a thief? Father was one of the thieves who robbed Mr. Tait's strong-room."

"At Tait's request, remember," interpolated Charvington quickly.

Lesbia brushed away the speech. "Oh, what does it matter even if they are all thieves? But George must have known the dreadful truth and so he will not renew our engagement. I did not understand him before; I do now."

"There! there!" and Charvington patted her shoulder again, "don't worry. All will come right, I am sure, and in a way which you do not expect."

Lesbia looked up with sudden hope. "You know of something?"

"Yes," said the man gloomily. "I know of something. Don't ask me any further questions just now, but go back to Marlow. The motor-car is already at the door with your box on it. As all our other guests have left the house, your departure will cause no surprise."

"But the police. Will they not want to question me?"

"I'll attend to that. I told the inspector that if necessary he could question you at Rose Cottage. But as I hope to make your father give back the jewels, the prosecution will be dropped. Remember, the police do not know that your father is guilty. Being thus ignorant, they can do nothing. Go away in peace, my dear, and leave everything to me."

Lesbia rose, shuddering. "How can I go back to my father, knowing what I now know?" she murmured, shivering.

"You go back to the cottage," explained Charvington distinctly. "It is my cottage, as I pay the rent; the furniture also is mine. I have supported your father for years, and this is the way he repays me. However, the cottage is yours. I promise you that your father will not come near you."

"I trust not. I trust not. I could not face him. And you?"

"I shall come over and see you shortly. But go away, contented to know that all is well. There will be no scandal, and not a word will be said about this burglary. Your father is safe and you are safe. Later, I shall see about getting your father to go to Australia, and then you can marry Walker."

"If he will have me," sighed the unfortunate girl.

"Lesbia," Charvington took her face between his two hands and looked into her eyes; "I swear that you shall marry him. There! Let the dead past alone and dream of future happiness," and he kissed her solemnly.

CHAPTER XVIII

LADY CHARVINGTON'S ACCUSATIONS

WHILE Lesbia was thus having so miserable a time, George Walker was living very quietly, sometimes in London but more often in Medmenham. He carefully avoided all mention of Lesbia's name, and when his mother questioned him regarding his reason for refusing to renew the engagement he declined to explain. Mrs. Walker was much annoyed by what she termed his mule-headedness as, after her visit to Rose Cottage, she was quite willing that Lesbia should become her daughter-in-law.

"I cannot understand you, George," said Mrs. Walker to her son during one of their frequent wrangles. "When I objected to this girl, nothing would do but that you must marry her. Now that I have taken a fancy to her, you refuse to have anything to do with her. I never thought a son of mine would blow hot and cold in this silly fashion."

"I am not blowing hot or cold," returned George gloomily; he was very, very gloomy in those days, and had lost all his light-heartedness. "Lesbia is the only girl in the world that I care to marry. But how can I make her my wife, when I haven't a penny to keep her with?"

"That is mere evasion. Things are very little changed from the time you would have married her in the teeth of poverty."

"There is this much change, that I have lost my situation with Tait and am now living on my mother, which is the meanest thing a man can do. How, then, can I renew my engagement with Lesbia?"

"Because I wish you to," said Mrs. Walker promptly, and bent her black brows.

"I understood you hated her."

"Indeed, I never did," she rejoined sharply. "How could I hate anyone whom I had never seen? Don't be a fool, George. I certainly hated her father, and I hate him still, for a very good reason, which it does not concern you to know. But after I saw the girl I repented

that I had not been to see her before, since you loved her. She is an innocent darling, and I should like no one better for my daughter. It would be unfair to visit the sins of the father on so sweet a child."

"Yet if the child wasn't sweet," said George drily, "you would not mind doing so. You are somewhat inconsistent."

"I am not so inconsistent as you are," said his mother, skilfully avoiding a reply by carrying the war into his camp. "What I wish to know is—why do you decline to renew your engagement?"

"I have no money and no situation."

"That isn't the true reason."

"It is the sole reason which I choose to give."

"There is no necessity to be rude, George," said Mrs. Walker with great dignity. "Cannot you get another situation?"

"Not easily. Tait will give me no references, nor do I care to ask him for any. Situations are hard to get without references."

Mrs. Walker clasped her strong, white hands together and frowned. "It is quite absurd that my son and the son of your father should be a mere clerk in the City," she burst out. "Can't you do something better?"

"No," replied George gloomily. "I am not clever, and I have not been brought up to any trade."

"Trade! Trade! My son in trade!"

George was sad enough at heart, yet could not forbear smiling at the horror expressed on her countenance. "There is nothing disgraceful in trade," he remarked quietly. "My grandfather Morse was a merchant."

"And your grandfather Casterton was an earl," snapped Mrs. Walker. "There's your uncle, the present owner of the title. Why not go to him, and see if he cannot assist you?"

"And when I ask him, what excuse can I make?"

"He is your uncle: he has every right to assist you."

"I fear he might not see things in the same light, mother. Besides, I have no qualifications."

George paused, then added gloomily: "An out-of-door colonial life would suit me. Give me enough to get to Canada or Australia, mother, and there I can carve my way."

"What about me?" asked Mrs. Walker reproachfully.

"I will make a home for you beyond the seas, and you can come out later."

Mrs. Walker shook her head. "I am too old to travel so far," she said grimly, "moreover, I intend to wait until I get the fortune of my sister. She is dead: I am sure from what Walter Hale says that there is no child, so in the end Jabez must give me the fifty thousand pounds. That money would put all things right: your marriage included."

"Not with Lesbia," said the young man, colouring. "There is no chance of our coming together. Besides, to get the money you must find that cross."

"Nothing of the sort," said his mother quickly. "Jabez only requires its production by a possible child, as a means of identification; a very silly idea I call it. But he knows that I am Judith Morse, and so by my father's will inherit, now that my sister is dead."

George shook his head doggedly.

"I believe that you will never get the fortune until that cross is found."

"Then find it."

"I can't. I have tried my best to learn who assaulted me and robbed this cottage, but I am still in the dark."

This ended the conversation for the time being. But as the days went by Mrs. Walker still continued to express her disgust at George's obstinacy regarding Lesbia. She knew that he still loved the girl, and could not think why he should refuse to renew the engagement in the face of Lesbia's letter. Of course the excuse of having no situation was rubbish, so Mrs. Walker decided, as Lesbia was willing to marry him without one penny. If he truly loved her, as she did him, poverty would be no bar. When was poverty ever a bar to the union of two young hearts? Even admitting that George wanted to provide a home before renewing the engagement, he surely could have seen Lesbia and explained his reasons for behaving as he was doing. But he never went near Marlow, and refused to mention her name. As Mrs. Walker, being as obstinate as her son, insisted on discussing his unfor-

fortunate love affair, and wrangling over the same, George took to remaining for days in London on the plea that he was looking for work. Time thus passed very miserably for the grim widow.

One day George came down with the news that he had received a note from Lord Charvington, asking him to call at The Court, Maidenhead. Why he should wish to see him George could not guess, as he had never met him. But in the letter Charvington said that he had been a friend of Aylmer Walker and so desired the interview. Mrs. Walker was also puzzled. She was well acquainted with Lord Charvington, but after her scampish husband's death she had kept away from the former society she frequented, on account of her poverty. All the same she advised George to keep the appointment, which was made for the next day, if only to hear what Charvington had to talk about.

It was strange, a coincidence in fact, that Lady Charvington's motor should stop on the afternoon of that very day at the gate of the Medmenham cottage. Never before to George's knowledge had his mother mentioned Lord Charvington's name, yet on the very day when it was on her lips, because of the letter, the wife of the nobleman arrived to pay a visit. Why she should do so was not quite clear, and Mrs. Walker entered the drawing-room with a frown. She and her sister Kate had been schoolgirls together, and she had never approved of the lady. Her greeting was very cold.

"How are you, Helen?" she said, extending the tips of her fingers. "It is a surprise to see you in my humble abode."

"I would have called before, only I knew that you did not wish to see me, Judith," said Lady Charvington, sinking gracefully into the nearest arm-chair; "but I have come on business."

Mrs. Walker sat also, and folded her hands on the lap on her black dress with her usual grim smile. "Of course, I knew that you would not waste your valuable time in coming for nothing. But what business you can have with me I fail to see. We were never good friends, and you positively hated Kate because she was prettier than you."

"That she never was," said Lady Charvington hotly, and glanced in the silver-framed hand-mirror which stood on the table at her elbow. "Kate had not my complexion, nor my hair."

"Nor your nasty temper," snapped Mrs. Walker, who felt extremely nasty herself; "but I don't know why we should talk of good looks at our age."

"I am not old, Judith: you are older than I am."

"Quite so, and I wear ever so much better. You look twice your age."

Lady Charvington made a face. "You were always a disagreeable girl, she pouted. "I daresay I am growing no younger, but you need not tell me so. As to my looks, if you were as worried as I am, you would not look your best either. So I—who is that?" she inquired, as George, ignorant that his mother had a visitor, tapped at the French window of the drawing-room.

"My son George," said Mrs. Walker, rising to admit him.

"Oh!" cried Lady Charvington vivaciously. "Lesbia's George."

"My son, Lady Charvington," said Mrs. Walker, introducing the pair. "George, this is an old friend of mine."

Lady Charvington looked at the splendidly handsome young man, and secretly envied her hostess. Neither of her children was so good-looking; and moreover—what she always regretted—she had provided no heir to the title.

"So you are Lesbia's George," she said again, not offering her hand, but putting up her lorgnette. "Well, the girl has taste."

George coloured under her impertinent gaze and at the sudden mention of Lesbia. He no more expected Lady Charvington to mention the girl than he had expected she would arrive on the very day when her name had first been mentioned in the cottage—that is, her husband's name. "What do you know of Lesbia, Lady Charvington?" he asked, taking a chair.

She gave an artificial laugh. "Nothing very creditable."

The young man started and grew an angry red. Mrs. Walker frowned, and making a sign that her son should

be silent, spoke for him. "What do you mean by running down the girl, Helen? Let me tell you, Lesbia's name must be mentioned in this house only with respect."

"Oh, I know that she loves your son, and that he loves her—unfortunately."

"Why so?" asked George, very directly and still red with anger. He was beginning to dislike this pretty, perfumed, dainty woman, who looked as frivolous as his mother was stately.

"Because she is, I shrewdly suspect, a—a——" Lady Charvington hesitated, for the young man looked so angry, and Mrs. Walker so grim, that she feared to bring out the hateful word. "Well, the fact is," she rattled on, "I have lost an amethyst cross, and I believe that Lesbia Hale has taken it."

"An amethyst cross," repeated George, astonished—too much so, in fact, to repel the accusation against Lesbia with the promptitude he wished. "A cross consisting of four amethyst stones with a green cube of malachite in the centre bearing a crown, and inscribed 'Refuse and Lose'?"

"Yes." Lady Charvington was astonished. "Do you know it?"

"Of course I do. It belongs to me."

"To you? Impossible! It is, as I believe, the property of Lord Charvington, and was stolen with other jewels from The Court a few days ago."

"But how did it get to The Court?—how did it come into your possession?"

"It came into my possession a few weeks ago. I entered the library during my husband's absence and found this cross on his table. Wondering why he had such a jewel and thinking that he had bought it for me, I took it to my room. Charvington went away before I could speak to him about it, and never made any inquiries—strange to say—as to its being taken away. I placed it in my jewel-case and forgot all about it. Then my case was stolen by two London thieves a few days ago, and the cross also."

"You declared that Lesbia stole it," said Mrs. Walker grimly, "and now you say that two thieves——"

"Lesbia was in league with them."

George sprang to his feet. "That is wholly false, Lady Charvington. That is——" he became aware of his rudeness and stammered, "you—you must be mistaken."

"I am never mistaken," said the visitor in icy tones. "Your son has not very good manners, Judith."

"They are my manners," said Mrs. Walker fiercely, "and don't you find fault with them. He has only said what I intended to say, only more politely."

Before Lady Charvington could snap out a reply, George, now very pale, intervened. "Perhaps, madam, you will explain to me upon what grounds you base this charge against Miss Hale."

"Oh, certainly," rejoined Lady Charvington sharply, "the whole world might know what I have to say; and the whole world would," she added spitefully, "only my husband, who seems to have taken a fancy to this girl, has hushed up the matter."

"He has more sense than you have," muttered Mrs. Walker, "badly as he treated——" she checked herself with a side glance at George. "But that is neither here nor there. Go on, Helen, and explain."

Lady Charvington, in order to make George writhe—for she saw that he loved Lesbia deeply, and resented the fact—was only too ready to give details of the robbery at The Court with all the venom of which her very bitter tongue was capable. She related everything that had happened from the hour of Lesbia's arrival to the moment of her departure. "And in disgrace," ended the lady exultingly, "certainly private disgrace, since, for some silly reason, Charvington made me hold my tongue, but disgrace nevertheless. Now what do you think?"

"Think"—George, standing with a white face and clenched hands, took the words out of his mother's mouth—"I think that you are a very wicked woman, Lady Charvington. Lesbia is as innocent as a dove."

"I know nothing of the morals of doves," retorted Lady Charvington coolly, "but you seem to forget that I said this girl's father was one of the thieves. Who the other one was I can't say, but Lesbia certainly recognised her father. Bertha, my maid, heard

her exclamation while she was lying half-stunned on the floor."

"I am not astonished," said Mrs. Walker bitterly. "Walter Hale is capable of all things, although I did not know that he would descend quite so low. I never liked him as you did, Helen."

"Leave the past alone," said Lady Charvington with an angry gesture; "but you can see that this Lesbia creature was her father's accomplice."

"Speak more respectfully of Lesbia, if you please," said George in a cold white fury. "She is perfectly innocent, and knew no more of her father's wickedness than——"

"Than you did, I suppose."

"You are wrong. I knew some weeks ago that Walker Hale had to do with a gang of thieves."

"George!" cried his mother, aghast; "you never told me."

"There was no need to," he said quickly. "I know that Hale, acting on Tait's orders, stole the jewels from——"

"Was this why you broke your engagement with Lesbia, or rather why you would not renew it?"

"That was the reason," said George awkwardly.

Mrs. Walker stood up sternly. "Then you believe that Lesbia is an accomplice?"

"No, I don't. My reason is different."

"You refuse to marry the daughter of a thief, perhaps," said Lady Charvington mockingly.

"I do not. My reason—never mind. I can explain my reason to Lesbia when I see her," said George, standing very straight and looking very determined.

"You intend to see her, then?" asked his mother.

"This very evening."

"I shall come also," said Mrs. Walker quickly.

"If that is so," drawled Lady Charvington, "perhaps you will ask her what she has done with the cross."

"She has not got it," cried George. "How can she have it when you declared that her father stole it and——"

"Oh," Lady Charvington laughed cruelly, "I daresay her father gave her the amethyst cross as her share of the plunder."

"Helen, hold your bitter tongue," cried Mrs. Walker wrathfully.

"If you speak of Lesbia in that way, or dare to smirch her fair fame," said George very deliberately, "I shall make it my business to make things unpleasant all round."

"As how?" asked Lady Charvington, putting up her lorgnette.

"To-morrow I am to see Lord Charvington by appointment——"

"I was not aware that you knew my husband."

"I do not, but he wrote to me, and I am to see him."

"Ah," drawled Lady Charvington coolly, "perhaps, knowing that you love this wretched girl, my husband intends to arrange that you shall marry her and take her out of the country."

The young man restrained his anger by violent effort. "Perhaps you are correct, madam," he said in a thick voice and breathing hard. "But I shall also ask Lord Charvington how the cross came to be in his possession."

"No!" Lady Charvington shrieked and seemed much perturbed. "You must not do that."

"Madam," said George in a stately manner and following up his advantage, "I am the owner of that cross, which was given to me by Miss Hale. I was assaulted on the towing-path so that I might be robbed of it. As the thief did not find it on my person he burgled this cottage and took it from my room. I have every right to ask Lord Charvington how he became possessed of it."

The visitor rose with rather a pale face but quite composed, and shook perfume from her costly draperies as she gathered up her belongings to depart. "Things are bad for Lesbia Hale as it is," she said composedly. "I advise you to ask no questions of my husband, or he may withdraw his protection from her. If he does, she is disgraced publicly."

"I don't believe it," said Mrs. Walker, crossing to the window and opening it. "You can leave my cottage by this way, Helen, and the sooner the better."

Lady Charvington swept towards the French window with a careless laugh, obviously forced. "I am only too willing to go," she declared. "I only came over

to ask you to question Lesbia Hale as to what she has done with my amethyst cross."

"Mine, pardon me," said George firmly, as he held the window open, "and you may be sure that I shall marry Lesbia and protect Lesbia even against you who seem to hate her, Heaven only knows why."

"Your mother knows," sneered Lady Charvington. "Well, do what you like, only remember that I have warned you!" and with these ominous words she took her welcome departure.

"What is next to be done?" asked Mrs. Walker, when the motor had hummed away.

"We must see Lesbia," said George firmly. "What has been said brings us together at last."

CHAPTER XIX

MR. HALE EXPLAINS

WHEN Lesbia returned to Rose Cottage, after her unluckily visit to The Court, she found that her father had never been near the place. Tim, who was alone in the house when she arrived, explained that Hale had gone to London within an hour of Lesbia's departure with Lady Charvington in the motor-car. There was nothing in this to surprise the little Irishman, as Hale's comings and goings were always more or less abrupt. But he was amazed when he heard what Lesbia had to tell; the revelation being occasioned by Tim's distressed remark on the girl's pallor.

"Ah, now, miss, an' what hev ye bin doin' wid yer purty silf at all, at all? Sure, the face av ye's as white as a corpse."

Lesbia burst into tears. "Oh, Tim, I sometimes wish that I was one, I feel as very miserable. George will have nothing to do with me; Lady Charvington hates me; and my father—my father——"

"Phwat av him?" asked Tim anxiously.

"Can you guess?" asked Lesbia, drying her eyes, and wondering how much or how little the man knew of Hale's rascalities.

Tim's face remained passive, but he could not keep

a certain amount of anxiety out of his eyes. "Sure, but the masther isn't a good man," he said in a hesitating manner, "he trates ye like a brute baste, miss."

"It's worse than that," sobbed Lesbia, breaking down again.

The servant changed colour and raised his hands in mute despair. When he did find his voice, it was to ask a leading question: "An' how much do ye know, me dear?"

"I know that my father is a thief."

"Augh! the shame av it," muttered Tim, but did not contradict.

Lesbia noticed that he was less surprised than he should have been. "You knew that?"

"Mary be good to us all!" said Tim sadly. "But I know a mighty lot I'd rather not know, me dear. But are ye sure, miss?"

Lesbia sat up, dried her eyes, and detailed all that had happened. Tim listened in dismayed silence with his sad eyes on her pale face, and she heard him grind his teeth when it came to an account of Lady Charmington's accusation. When she had ended he still kept silence.

"What do you think of it all, Tim?" asked his mistress, anxious to hear what he had to say.

"It's black lies that woman spakes," cried Tim vehemently. "Ye nivir knew av the masther's wrong-doin'."

"Did you, Tim?"

"I knew a trifle, an' guessed a mighty lot. Nivir ask me, miss, phwat I know till his lardship—an' sure he's a good man—spakes the wurrd. But I know wan thing, me dear heart, that the blackest clouds have the blissid sun behint thim."

"There is no sun behind these clouds," said Lesbia, sighing.

"An' there ye're wrong, miss," said Tim briskly. "Sure, whin them clouds do let the blissid sun sind out th' light av him, ye'll foind pacc an' happiness an' joy galore. Lave things to his lardship. The crass began the throuble, an' the crass will end that same."

"Tim, Tim, what do you know about the cross?"

"Ah, nivir ask me phwat I know," croaked Tim

again. "There's whales within whales, me dear, an' me mouth's bin sealed fur many a year. . But whin his lardship spakes I spake, and thin ye'll be as happy as thim who dwell in Tirnanoge."

"What's that, Tim?"

"The land av youth where ye and Masther Garge shud be, an' will be, whin the blissid saints in glory let ye come into yer own." And after delivering himself of this agreeable prophecy, Tim shuffled to prepare dinner.

Lesbia was much astonished at the hints thus given, and also much perplexed. Tim seemed to know of the significance of the amethyst cross, of the rascality of her father, and also he appeared to know about Lord Charvington as a possible *deus ex machina*, who would make the crooked quite straight. Later in the evening she questioned the little man persistently, but Tim, as wily as an otter, evaded a direct reply, only insisting that everything would come right in a most unexpected way. With this Lesbia would scarcely have been content, but that her attention was taken away from the future to deal with the present.

Urged by Tim, and now feeling more hopeful as she recalled Charvington's promise to stand by her, Lesbia made a moderately good dinner. While Tim was washing up in the kitchen, she sat near the window of the tiny parlour reading the first book that came to hand. But the pages did not interest her and, moreover, it soon grew too dark to read without lights. Lesbia did not call for these, as she liked the pensive twilight, and so dreamed of George and future happiness in the gloaming. There was just light enough to see across the room, so she started with surprise and indignation when she saw her father suddenly appear in the doorway. He looked much the same as usual, but then the light was not strong enough to permit her to see the shame which must certainly have appeared on his face.

"Why have you come here?" asked Lesbia, rising indignantly.

"I have assuredly a right to enter my own house," retorted her father.

"It is not your house," she replied boldly. "Lord

Charvington told me that it belonged to him, and declared you would come here no more."

"Ah!" Hale lounged into the room, and dropped with a sigh of fatigue into a chair. "Charvington proposed more than he could perform; he always did."

"How did you come in?"

"By the back door, which was open. I rowed up from Cookham."

"You can't stop here," said Lesbia firmly.

"You can't prevent me," said her father, with a sneer.

"I can leave the house, and I will."

"Where will you go?"

"To Mrs. Walker; she will protect me. I will throw myself on her mercy. But I refuse to remain under the same roof as you."

Hale winced at the scorn in her tones. "You seem to forget that you are speaking to your father," he said in an icy manner.

"God help me!" cried the girl, with a gesture of despair; "I wish I could forget. You have brought shame upon me."

"Oh, rubbish!" said Hale crossly. "I received a letter from Charvington in London, just before I came down to Cookham, which stated that if I restored the jewels everything would be hushed up."

"And you will do so?"

"I have to," said Hale grudgingly. "It's an infernal nuisance after all my trouble, but Charvington says that he will set the police on my track if I don't act square. I shall return the jewels to-morrow, and then everything will be put right. There is no disgrace to you."

"Isn't there?" said Lesbia, with a bitter laugh. "You appear to have forgotten that Bertha, the maid, heard my recognition of you, and told her mistress. Lady Charvington accused me of being your accomplice, and but that our cousin made her hold her tongue and silenced the maid, I should have been arrested as knowing your rogueries and sharing in them."

Hale muttered an oath between his teeth. "Upon my word, that's too bad," he said half apologetically.

"The woman had no right to speak of you in that way, as you are as innocent as a babe. However, if Charvington has hushed that up also, there is no harm done."

"Father," cried Lesbia, moving forward to confront him, "can you think that I will consent to live with you, now that I know of your wickedness?"

"What do you know, other than that I took Lady Charvington's jewels?" asked her father defiantly.

"I know that you stole Mr. Tait's jewels by his direction."

"Who dares to say that?" demanded Hale, starting fiercely to his feet.

"Mr. Canning——"

"Mister!" sneered Hale savagely; "since when has he earned such respect?"

"Mr. Canning is a gentleman and is Captain Sargent's brother," said Lesbia in calm, easy tones. Now that she had come to close grips with her father she felt singularly cool.

Hale muttered a second oath. "I knew that The Shadow had betrayed us," he said ominously. "Well, he shall pay for his treachery. His silly gratitude to you for nursing him has made him dishonourable to us."

"Dishonourable!" cried Lesbia scornfully.

"Why not?" scoffed her father. "There is honour amongst thieves."

"And *you* are a thief?"

"I am," said Hale, shamelessly. "I was driven to such courses because I wanted money. You may as well know the worst, for I——"

"Oh!" Lesbia threw up her hand, feeling sick at heart. "Don't tell me any more. Leave this house and never see me again."

Hale settled himself firmly in his chair. "I will do nothing of the sort," he declared; "this is my house, whatever Charvington may say. Here I am and here I rest. There's a French soldier's saying for you," he sneered.

"Oh," Lesbia sighed as she looked up, "will nothing make this man ashamed?"

"Nothing!" Hale put his legs up on another chair. "Absolutely nothing."

At this moment there came a sharp ring of the front door bell. Hale started to his feet with an ejaculation, and Lesbia could guess that his shameless face had turned white in the shadowy twilight. Apparently he expected the police, as she gathered from his broken mutterings. "But it is impossible," he breathed, clenching his hands; "Charvington said that he would say nothing if the jewels were sent back. I shall send them to-morrow, and if there is a—Ah!"

The two listening in the half-dark room heard Tim shuffle along the narrow passage and open the door. A moment later and Mrs. Walker's voice, cold and haughty, struck on their ears. Hale wiped his face and heaved a sigh of relief. "Don't betray me to that woman," he whispered.

"I shall not," said Lesbia quietly. "After all, bad as you are, I cannot forget that you are my father."

Even as the last word dropped from her mouth, the door opened and Mrs. Walker was ushered into the room. Behind her came Tim bearing high a lamp to light her way. The radiance revealed Lesbia white and shrinking and the defiant face of Walter Hale.

"The masther, howly saints!" muttered Tim, setting down the lamp; then he addressed Lesbia, quietly: "Will I bring more lights, miss, av ye plase?"

"No, thank you, Tim, this lamp will be enough. Shut the door."

Without a single glance at his master, Tim departed and left the trio together. Mrs. Walker, standing just within the room, had said nothing. Only when the door was closed did she speak. "I did not expect to find you here, Mr. Hale," she said with contempt and scarcely concealed surprise.

"And where should I be, save in my own house?" he asked, lightly.

"In gaol," she snapped; "and there you would be, had I my way."

Hale raised his eyebrows. "I do not understand," he remarked, coolly.

"Yes you do, and you will understand completely when I tell you that Lady Charvington came to see me to-day." Hale uttered an exclamation of rage and vexation. "Yes, you may well swear, for she told both

George and myself about the robbery at The Court. What do you say to that, you detected scoundrel?" she asked, sternly.

"Hush!" he muttered gruffly, "my daughter is present."

"I am glad she is; I want her to know what you are."

"I do know," faltered Lesbia, weakly, "and oh!"—she covered her face to sink in a passion of tears on the sofa—"it is shameful, shameful."

Mrs. Walker looked at Hale, still defiant and hard-faced. "I would have spared you this for the girl's sake," she breathed, "but she caught you red-handed, so there is nothing to conceal." With a stern look at him, she glided to the sofa and took the shrinking, fragile form of the unhappy girl in her strong arms: "Lesbia, my love," she said tenderly, and the change in her voice was extraordinary, "I have come to stand by you. That man is not fit to have charge of you. Come with me, to-night, to Medmenham."

"Oh, no—no—George——"

"George knows all that you know, that I know. He was present when Lady Charvington came to tell us what had taken place."

"And George despises me," wept Lesbia, burying her face in Mrs. Walker's bosom.

"Don't be ridiculous, child, don't be foolish. How can he despise you when you are innocent and he loves you?"

"Loves me—loves me," Lesbia looked up startled: "but he refused to renew our engagement, although I abased myself to the dust to regain him."

"I think George will be able to explain why he acted in that way," she whispered. "In a few minutes you will meet George under the chestnut tree where he proposed to you. It's an idea of his that he should explain himself there, and there renew the engagement. We both arranged to come here to-night and were to drive over. But at the last moment George took to his boat and is now rowing down the river to meet you under the trysting-tree. I drove over."

"Oh!" Lesbia sat up, smiles breaking through her tears. This was a gleam of sunshine indeed. "George is coming back."

"He will hold you in his arms very shortly," said Mrs. Walker, her hard face becoming strangely tender. "You poor dear child, how cruelly you have been treated! But the worst is over: you shall marry my George and be happy."

"Indeed!" said Hale in an acrid, thin voice. "I am not to be consulted, then?"

Mrs. Walker placed Lesbia tenderly back on the sofa and arranged the cushion. Then she turned, hard and harsh once more, to the delinquent. "You are not to be consulted about Lesbia," she said calmly, "as you are unfit to have anything to do with her. But I have come to consult you about the amethyst cross."

"I know nothing about it," said Hale, starting and biting his nether lip.

"That's a lie," said Mrs. Walker fiercely. "Lady Charvington found the cross in her husband's library, where he had left it, and, thinking that he had bought it for her, placed it in her jewel-case. As you stole the case you must have the cross. Give it to me at once. I want it."

"I know nothing about it," said Hale doggedly and raising his heavy eyes. "You are wrong—the cross was not with the jewels. I shall send them back to Lord Charvington to-morrow, as only by my restoring them will he agree not to prosecute. Charvington will show you the case, and you will see that there is no cross amongst them."

"I quite believe that," said Mrs. Walker, scornfully, "because you intend to keep it back. What use it is to you I can't say, as in no way can you obtain my sister's money."

Hale scowled and, stretching out his legs, slipped his hands into his pockets. He was perfectly dressed as usual in a cool tweed suit, and looked in the half-light a very handsome and presentable man. No one would have taken him for a sordid thief. "I have not the cross," was all he could say. "It was not with the jewels. I don't know where it is."

"Lord Charvington——"

"If he had it in his library he must have robbed your cottage to get it, and also must have assaulted

your son. I wonder you can stand that," said Hale with a sneer, "especially since you have a score against the man as it is. But then you are so forgiving."

"You will not find me so," said Mrs. Walker caustically. "As to Charvington, I believe he was more sinned against than sinning. I shall speak of that when we meet. As it is, my feelings towards him have relented so far as to permit my son to see him to-morrow."

"What!" asked Lesbia, who had sat quietly during this passage of arms, "is George going over to The Court?"

"Yes. Lord Charvington sent him a message asking him to call. What he wishes to see him about I cannot guess."

"I know, I know!" cried the girl joyfully. "I told him about George and how George had lost his situation through a false accusation. Lord Charvington said that he would see George and get him something to do, so that we might marry."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Mrs. Walker, smiling and smoothing the girl's hair.

"Will you let your son accept favours from Charvington?" asked Hale sneeringly, "from the man who——"

"That is quite enough," said Mrs. Walker, imperiously. "I will have an explanation with Lord Charvington. I believe from the bottom of my heart that you were the cause of all the trouble between us. But it strikes me"—Mrs. Walker gathered her mantle round her and sat with folded arms like a grim and pitiless Fate—"that you are nearing the end, Mr. Walter Hale. Destiny has been kind to you so far: she will be kind no longer. I see," Mrs. Walker stared at Hale's twitching face; "I see imprisonment: I see death: I see——"

"Oh, damn your Witch of Endor rubbish!" shouted Hale, jumping to his feet with the perspiration beading his brow, for he was impressed by the absolute conviction with which she spoke. "You talk nonsense, infernal nonsense. And see here, you shall not interfere between my daughter and——"

"I will do as I please, and so shall Lesbia," said Mrs. Walker, interrupting the vehement speech. "You

forget that you are only at large because of Lord Chavington's refusal to prosecute. If you meddle with this marriage as you have done, he will lay you by the heels. Yes, you and your gang."

"My gang?" Hale swallowed something and laughed uneasily. "My gang?"

"You and Tait and Maud Ellis and Sargent and that miserable opium-smoking brother of his. You are all rogues and thieves and——"

"You can prove nothing of all this," interrupted Hale, now quite livid.

"George can," said Mrs. Walker, nodding significantly. "He has seen the man Canning, whom you call The Shadow, although his real name is Arthur Sargent."

"Oh!" Lesbia rose quickly. "Has Mr. Canning seen George?"

"Yes, and he has told much which your precious father would like to be hidden," said Mrs. Walker quietly.

Hale laughed and wiped his brow. "All the same," he said, wetting his dry lips, "I am Lesbia's father after all. If you disgrace me, you disgrace her, so I am quite safe."

"That is right, hide behind a woman's petticoats," said Mrs. Walker bitterly, "it was always your custom. Now you come with me," she rose. "I have something to say to you and it must be said out-of-doors. Lesbia, go into the garden and see George."

"I'll come," said Hale promptly enough, "I am not afraid of arrest: I know too much. After you, madam," and he held the door open mockingly.

CHAPTER XX

JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS MEETING

ORDINARILY speaking, Lesbia would have anxiously awaited the conclusion of Mrs. Walker's out-of-door interview with her father. But when she saw them stroll away in the moonlight, she suddenly remembered that George was waiting in the garden to explain.

Probably the interview asked by Mrs. Walker had merely been an excuse to get Hale out of the way so that he might not interrupt the lovers' meeting, as he assuredly would do if left to his own marplot devices. Lesbia, therefore, saw that it was foolish to waste the golden hour, when it had been so propitiously brought about. Closing the front door, she ran rapidly along the passage into the garden and sped lightly down the grass-grown path. In another minute she was under the tree and in George's arms.

The night was lovely with moonlight and radiant with stars. In the neglected garden roses red and white and yellow breathed fragrance into the still, warm air of summer. There was not a breath of wind, and the ripples on the broad river were only formed by the smoothly-flowing current. It murmured softly between the green banks and was an accompaniment to the occasional song of the nightingales, which spoke one to the other in the garden and across the river. At the dawn of love, the blackbird had fluted his song of joy, when the sky was blue and the sunshine was glorious. Now the sleeping world was bathed mysteriously in silver under a starry dome, and the nightingale sang a divine song. Through much sorrow had they come to a better understanding of love, and the liquid notes of the sweet songster alone could interpret the nobler feelings which trouble had begotten. In George's arms lay Lesbia, safe at last in the haven of love, and the night sent upon them a benediction in the song of the bird.

"But you have been very, very cruel," said Lesbia softly. Woman-like she was the first to find her tongue.

"I might say the same of you, dear," whispered George, sitting down and gathering her closer in his arms; "but neither of us was cruel—circumstances are to blame."

Lesbia, knowing that there was no period to the golden hour now that her father was out of the way, settled herself comfortably for a long talk. She had much to tell and much to ask, and before the rapture of love's silence could be renewed there was much to explain. "I know that I behaved very badly," she whispered penitently, "but I could not help it. Unless

I had broken our engagement, my father told me that Maud Ellis would denounce you as a thief."

"I understand, dearest; but you did not believe that I was guilty?"

"No," Lesbia pressed her cheek against his, "of course I didn't: but if I had not been cruel I should not have been kind. I could not risk Maud's accusing you publicly. But perhaps," added the girl, hopefully, "she would not have done so, and I was weak to be so cajoled by her and by my father."

"I think you acted wisely," said George, after a pause. "Maud led me into the trap and certainly would not have let me out again until I agreed to marry her, or at least until you gave me up. You did so, and she was content for the time being. She could part us, my sweet, but she could not make me false to you."

"I knew it, in spite of your cruel letter."

"It was as cruel as yours, Lesbia, so we can cry quits on that score. I know that you learned the truth through Canning. He explained to me, and spoke very gratefully of your kindness to him in his illness."

"How did you meet him, George?"

"He met me. That is, he wrote to me at Medmenham asking me to see him in the City as he had something important to tell me. We met in a Mecca."

"A Mecca?"

"One of those underground coffee-rooms in London City, dear. There Canning, or rather Sargent as he really is, explained."

"He told you who he was?"

"Yes. And he told me also that Tait was connected with a gang of thieves, two members of which had robbed Tait's strong-room with his connivance. Tait thus got the insurance money in addition to the jewels, which he sold on the Continent. He made about forty thousand pounds over the deal and, after paying his accomplices, had enough left to avert a financial crisis, which was the reason for the robbery."

"Did you know then that my father was a thief?" asked Lesbia, shuddering.

"Of course not."

"I thought you did know, and for that reason had thrown me over."

"Lesbia," George said vehemently, and pressed her strongly to his breast that she almost cried out with the delicious pain, "how can you think so meanly of me? Were you the daughter of a murderer I should marry you. It is you whom I love, my dearest, and not all the fathers and crimes in the world will ever separate us."

"Yet something parted us for a time."

"Your letter."

"That at first," acknowledged Lesbia, sighing at the memory of what she had been forced to write, "then yours. Oh, George, when I made it plain that Maud—the horrid girl—could do nothing, why didn't you come back to me?"

"Because Maud was too clever. Finding out that she could not accuse me, since Canning could prove my innocence, Maud played a bold game and told me that your father had robbed Tait's strong-room. She swore that if I did not write to you as you had written to me, she would denounce Mr. Hale and have him put in prison. Lesbia," George suddenly slipped from his seat and knelt at the girl's feet, holding her hands tightly, "what could I do in the circumstances but write as Maud dictated? I did not dare to let her bring this shame on you."

"But you could have explained your reason."

"No, dear, no. Maud was too smart for that. She insisted that I should give no explanation, hoping that out of pique you would throw me over and marry Sargent as your father desired. He was in the plot also. I had to let things stand as I was helpless; but I trusted that your heart would guess the truth. I was always true to you; I have always been, but you no doubt thought me false from that letter, as I thought you heartless from the way in which you wrote. Now I can see, you can see, that neither one of us is to blame. We were the sport of circumstances."

Lesbia bent and kissed his yellow hair. "I understand now," she said softly; "but oh, George, how could Maud Ellis or my father think that I would marry Captain Sargent, a mere apology for a man, and hardly that even?"

"They hoped to work on your feelings; to wear

you out, my dear. But had you become engaged to that dandy scoundrel I should have stopped any possible marriage by denouncing Sargent as a member of Tait's gang."

"Is he, George?" asked Lesbia quickly, and she remembered what Mrs. Walker had said in the drawing-room.

"Yes. Canning—his brother, you know—did not tell me everything, but he revealed a great deal. Sargent is in society and poses as a man of good family living on his fortune. He is well born, but he has no money save what he obtains by theft."

Lesbia shuddered. "How horrible; how sordid! And my father?" her voice sank.

"He is in the swim also, so are Maud Ellis and Tait. Indeed, I believe that Tait is the head of the whole infernal business. But that I knew your father was in with the lot and that I wished to spare you I would have gone to the police at once."

"Oh!" Lesbia's tears dropped on her lover's hand; "how dreadful it all is."

George knelt before her and drew her head down on his shoulder. "There, there, dear!" he said, gently drying her eyes, "don't worry; we'll be married soon, and then you will be taken away from this terrible life."

"Tim also," murmured Lesbia tearfully; "I can't leave Tim behind."

"Of course he'll come too," said George cheerily. "I don't believe he knew anything of the rascality that was going on."

"I think he did," said Lesbia doubtfully; "not that he is wicked himself. But he knew and, I believe, held his dear tongue for my sake."

"Tim would do anything for you, darling, in the same way as Canning would."

"Poor Mr. Canning—I mean Mr. Sargent."

"No, don't call him by his real name; he wishes to be known simply as Canning—The Shadow. He belongs to the gang, and so does that Mrs. Petty who was set to watch you."

"A dreadful woman," said Lesbia, nestling; "how I disliked her! But I am sorry that Mr. Canning is wicked, George. He has been so kind."

"Kindness begets kindness," said Walker sententiously, "and I don't think Canning is so very wicked. He has been unlucky all his life, and drifted from bad to worse until he took to smoking opium. That finished him, and he was on the streets when his brother, who always kept his head, in spite of his silly looks, took him up and made him his servant. Canning does a lot of the dirty work of the gang, and did not denounce them, as he would only be thrown out again on the world. Also the gang would certainly do him harm if the fact of his betraying them became known."

"And it is known, George. I am sure of it; because Mr. Canning told me to mention his name to Maud Ellis. If she is a member of the gang, she must have told the rest about the betrayal."

"I daresay that is why Canning went into hiding," said George thoughtfully; "however, all we can do is to leave him to deal with the matter. For your sake I can say nothing, since your father——"

"George," Lesbia sat up and placed her hands on his shoulders, as he knelt at her feet, "your mother told me that you were going to see Lord Charvington to-morrow."

Walker nodded. "That is true, though I don't know what he wishes to see me about. I don't know him; I never met him."

"I have met him, and I know him," said Lesbia eagerly, "and he is the kindest and best man in the world. He wants to help us, George, and to get you something to do so that we may marry. Now you must ask him to advance you money to go to Australia or Canada, and we can marry before we go. Then we can start a new life."

"I suggested something of that sort to my mother, but she was averse from leaving England. Still, she may change her mind."

"She must, and she can come also," said Lesbia vehemently. "Oh, George, don't you see that I cannot remain in England? Even if my father escapes this time, as he will, because Lord Charvington is so kind, he is sure to be found out some day. Then think of the disgrace. I should always be unhappy thinking of what might happen. No, George, if you love me, let us marry

and place the ocean between this miserable old life and the happy new one which we are sure to have together. Say yes, dear George, say yes."

"I do, I do. I think your idea is excellent, and you must persuade my mother to act in this way. To-morrow I shall suggest our plan to Lord Charvington. I daresay he will give us enough to go away with, and then I shall soon earn enough to pay him back. Yes, dear," George rose, looking tall and stalwart in the moonlight, "we shall begin a new life together and leave all this wickedness behind us."

Lesbia rose also and clung to her tall lover like an ivy to an oak. "I believe that everything will come right at last," she declared joyfully, "as Tim says it will. Only he added that the cross began it and the cross must end it, whatever that may mean."

George shook his head. "I can't explain the cross," he said doubtfully, "it is all very mysterious. Lord Charvington had it in his possession, according to his wife. And yet I cannot think that Charvington would commit a burglary. He," George smiled broadly, "cannot possibly belong to the gang. However, it was stolen with the jewels, so your father——"

"He has not got it, George. He told your mother that he had not got it."

"Then either your father or Lady Charvington is telling a lie. However, I shall learn the truth when I see him to-morrow. And now, dear, you must go in, as it grows late."

"No," said Lesbia, petulantly. "I have to wait here until your mother comes to us. She went out to talk with my father. George," she added, after a pause, "I wonder what your mother knows about my father?"

"Nothing very good, you may be certain," said Walker grimly. "She must know him as a very clever rogue. By the way, Lesbia, do you know how your father and Sargent escaped discovery when they robbed Tait's strong-room?"

"Was Captain Sargent the other—thief?" said Lesbia, shivering at the horrible sound of the word.

"Yes. He and your father arranged with Tait. Maud knew of the arrangement and used it to inveigle

me into a trap. Her chloroform business was all a fake, if you will forgive the slang. Tait gave the key, and the two simply opened the strong-room and cleared with the jewels. When I pursued them they dodged into the wood round the house, and then entered the house again by a door which they had left open. Then, after putting away the jewels in Tait's own private room, they came down and joined the other guests in the search. Very clever of them, wasn't it, dear?"

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried Lesbia, catching his hand and looking white and wan. "It's so terrible to think that my own father should do this. Why have I such a father?" she asked, raising her eyes in despair to the moon. "What have I done to have such a father?"

"Hush, hush, dear," George pressed her to him. "Think no more of him. He is not worthy of you."

"He was never affectionate to me," sobbed Lesbia, whose nerves were quite unstrung, as might have been expected after what she had undergone. "We never understood each other. I was never drawn to him. Why, oh, why?"

George caught the hands she was wringing, firmly in his warm, kind clasp.

"My dearest, listen to me," he said softly. "You have been unhappy in the past, but you shall be happy in the future. Let your father fade out of your life, and come with me to the land of love. It is said that a woman shall forsake her parents and cling to her husband. So," said George, drawing himself up, "you are mine for ever, and when we are married it will be my delight to make you perfectly happy."

"Ah, yes, but the shadow of the past will ever remain. After all, he is my father. I can't do away with that," and she continued to sob.

The young man could only press her to his distressed heart and smooth her hair. After all, what could he say in the face of facts? Wicked and cold and hard and cruel as the man was, Hale undoubtedly was the girl's father, and nothing could do away with the painful fact. But for that relationship, George would have throttled Hale, or would have thrown him into the river; but as it was, he could do nothing. He could

not even comfort his dear love who lay sobbing in his arms. The nightingale still sang on, the stars still twinkled like jewels, and the moon still poured floods of white light down on the sleeping earth. But the magical glory of the scene was darkened to the lovers because of the evil of those around them. Yet—and Lesbia learned the lesson afterwards—out of sorrow comes joy, and the way of love is the way of the cross. Something like this came into the young man's mind.

"Remember the motto of the amethyst cross," he whispered. "'Refuse and lose'; we cannot understand why we are so afflicted, but we must bear the cross if we are to win the crown. And after all, dear, you should be sorry as I am for your father. He is reaping much grief and pain for his sowing."

Lesbia sighed and placed her arms round George's neck. "Yes," she said in a weary manner, "the cross is heavy, but we must bear it. I am sure that in the end all will come right. Tim said so, and so did Lord Charvington."

Down the pathway came Mrs. Walker, looking tall and stately and stern in her dark robes. Her face was set and white, and—strange in so hard a woman—she looked as though she had been weeping. "Lesbia," she said softly, "come back to the cottage and go to bed."

"But my father is there," sobbed the girl, "and you promised to take me back to Medmenham."

"Your father has left the cottage, for a time at least," said Mrs. Walker, gently disengaging the girl from her son's arms. "You will be alone with Tim and he will look after you, until we see how things turn out."

"How did you induce Mr. Hale to go, mother?" asked George, looking troubled.

"That is not for you to know at present," she said sternly. "I had an interview with him—a private interview," she added with emphasis, "and he saw that it was best to leave for a time. Rest in peace, my child," she said, kissing Lesbia's brow. "You are safe now, and can come to no harm. Be brave as you have been, for a little time longer, and all will end well."

"George," said Lesbia, stretching her arms like a weary child.

"Dearest!" the young man kissed her and gave her into his mother's charge. So the two women passed into the cottage, while he watched them sadly.

Sorrow had not yet done her work.

CHAPTER XXI

TWO INTERVIEWS

At the present moment George Walker had plenty of time on his hands, and, being naturally industrious, he did not enjoy the enforced idleness. Hitherto he had spent the bulk of his leisure hours in looking for a situation and in thinking of Lesbia. Now he made up his mind to act in order to bring about some sort of settlement of his very disorderly affairs. Lesbia could no longer remain with her father, as his character was so extremely bad. Hale had left the cottage, but would be certain to return again, therefore George wished to see if he could not marry Lesbia—say within a month—so as to rescue her from the troubles by which she was environed.

To do this he required assistance, and believed he would receive it from Lord Charvington, who appeared to be particularly well disposed towards the girl. The idea of emigrating to the Colonies—if Mrs. Walker could be persuaded to lend her approval to the suggestion—was by no means a bad one, as then the whole unhappy past could be set aside for ever. In another country, with better prospects, and unaffected by the sordid life compulsorily spent with sordid people, George foresaw that he would be able to make a calm, bright and happy future for himself and his wife. He therefore crossed the river and walked to Maidenhead with the idea of explaining his scheme to Charvington, and asking him to advance the necessary funds.

But before starting a new life George wished to round off the old. He saw very plainly that for some reason the amethyst cross had been the cause of the late troubles. Since its loss everything had gone wrong:

and it was necessary that it should be found if things were to be put right. Jabez, the lawyer, insisted that it should be produced before he would part with the fifty thousand pounds trust money. If, then, the ornament could be found and given into Jabez's hands, Mrs. Walker would benefit. Certainly, there was a chance that her late sister had left a child, but in the absence of proof this difficulty might be overcome. At all events, the production of the cross appeared to be necessary to force Jabez into dealing with the trust money and its accumulations.

Then again, George wished to do something for Canning. The man was a wastrel and a ne'er-do-well and had no one to take an interest in him: but he had done Lesbia a service at considerable risk, and it was only fair that he should be rewarded. Undoubtedly he belonged to the gang of clever thieves, but he had repented sufficiently of his wickedness to help the lovers, whom the gang—or at least three members of it—had desired to destroy. This service should be recompensed, especially as Canning could not remain in England without being exposed to the vengeance of his former associates. George determined to lay the case before Lord Charvington, and ask him to help. Failing any aid being forthcoming in this quarter, George intended to take Canning to Australia or Canada with him, and there start the man on a new career. Canning was not an old man, and there was ample time for him to redeem the shortcomings of his youth. He was not inherently wicked as were his brother and Hale, but merely weak.

On arriving at The Court, George was at once shown into the library wherein Lord Charvington was waiting for him. The old man arose courteously and came forward with outstretched hand. He appeared to be pleased that George had kept his appointment so punctually, and expressed himself with great cordiality.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Walker," he said, when the two were again seated. "I knew your father."

"My mother also, I believe, sir," said George.

Charvington's face changed. "I have not seen Mrs. Walker for many a long day," he remarked in a low

voice ; " perhaps we may meet again, but——" he paused to ask an abrupt and extraordinary question : " Does your mother ever speak ill of me ? " he demanded, his eyes eagerly searching the young man's face.

" No," answered George, much astonished. " She has scarcely mentioned your name. Why should she speak ill of you ? "

" I thought that Hale might have—but that is neither here nor there. It is enough for you to know, Mr. Walker, that I knew your mother and her sister over thirty years ago. We all three knew Hale also, and he caused trouble. He would cause trouble still if he could, but I think this last escapade of his will keep him quiet."

" Did you know my aunt Miss Katherine Morse ? " asked George, astonished.

" Yes." Charvington rested his head on his hand and drew figures on the blotting-paper. " But why do you speak of her by her maiden name ? She was married, you know."

" I don't know her married name. My mother never mentions it. Perhaps," George hesitated, " perhaps she doesn't know it."

" Yes, she does," answered Charvington, still drawing, " so does Hale. Your aunt died in his house at Wimbledon, remember. I understood from Jabez that Hale had admitted as much."

" I believe he did. You know Mr. Jabez ? "

" Yes." Charvington heaved a heavy sigh. " But I have not seen him for years. We correspond occasionally—that is all," he paused, then dropping the pencil with which he was drawing, wheeled his chair and looked at his guest briskly. " But we have no time to talk of these old stories. Let us come to the point. Have you heard about Lesbia's stay here ? "

" Yes," said George very distinctly. " Lady Charvington told both my mother and myself about the matter."

Lord Charvington's face grew a dull brick-red. " When did you see my wife ? "

" Yesterday ; she called on my mother at Medmenham."

"What did she say?" asked the elder man, abruptly and anxiously.

George gave details in a blunt, cool way, exaggerating nothing and suppressing nothing. The effect on Lord Charvington was very marked. He jumped up from his chair and paced the room, holding his head in both his hands.

"Good heavens: oh! good heavens," he muttered, "these women, these women! How dare Helen speak so! What does she guess? What does she know?"

"About what?" asked George with keen curiosity, and his question recalled Lord Charvington to the fact, which he seemed to have forgotten in his agitation, that he was not alone.

"Never mind," he said sharply, and returned to his seat more composed. "Do you mean to say that Lady Charvington stated that she had found the cross in this library?"

"Yes, sir. And I thought that you might know——"

"I know nothing," interrupted Charvington violently, and nervously shifting various articles on his writing-table. "I know that there is such a cross. I remember that Mr. Samuel Morse gave it to his daughter, and remarked on its oddity. But how did it get into this library?"

"Did you not bring it here?"

"No, sir; no." Charvington again rose and began to walk off his uncontrollable agitation. "I have not seen that cross for years. The last time I set eyes on it, Miss Morse—I may as well call her Miss Morse, since your mother has not revealed her married name—wore it round her neck. My wife says that she found it here. I tell you, Mr. Walker, that I do not know how it came into this room. I never saw it."

"How strange!" said George, believing this speech, but wondering nevertheless.

"But how comes it," asked Charvington, wheeling, "that *you* know about the amethyst cross, Mr. Walker?"

"I received it from Lesbia as a love-gift," explained George, and went on to relate the circumstances of the assault and robbery. Charvington walked up and down, nodding and muttering at intervals. When

George ended he came to a halt before the young man.

"Lesbia told me much of what you tell me," he said quietly, "but of course I was ignorant that my wife had taken the cross from this room. She did not tell me that. I cannot understand."

"And I," said George in his turn, "cannot understand why Lady Charvington is so bitter against Lesbia."

"Ah! Woman! Woman!" said Charvington, with a gesture of despair, "who can understand the nature of Woman! Let us leave that question for the time being, Mr. Walker. What we have to do is to get at the root of this matter. If the cross was in my wife's jewel-case, as she asserts, undoubtedly the burglary was committed to gain possession of it. Hale was the thief, as you know. He has sent me back the case intact. I received it this morning, as only on condition of its being restored would I consent to hush the matter up. And I hushed it up for his daughter's sake, Mr. Walker. But," Charvington wrinkled his brow and threw back his white mass of hair, "the amethyst cross is not amongst the jewels."

"Hale probably kept it back. He wants it, you know, as he has some idea of getting this money by producing it."

"Yes! Yes! I heard something about that," muttered Charvington, "but of course that is impossible, unless—unless——" he paused, opening and shutting his hands feverishly. "Damn him!" he burst out with a stamp of his foot, "I would like to throttle him as he nearly throttled you."

George looked up in surprise. "Throttled me?"

"Yes," said Charvington impatiently, "can't you see? It must have been Hale who assaulted you on the towing-path to get back that cross, and he, as an expert thief, took the ornament from your cottage."

"On the face of it, that appears probable," said George slowly; "all the same, I don't think it was the case."

"Why not? He wanted the amethyst cross."

"Quite so. But if he had obtained it from my cottage so long ago, he would have taken it to Mr.

Jabez to procure the money if possible. The mere fact, too, that he was willing I should marry Lesbia, if I found the missing ornament, shows that Hale did not commit the assault and robbery."

"Then who could have done so?"

George shrugged his shoulders. "I can't say. Probably the person who placed it in this room."

"If it ever was in this room?" muttered Charvington darkly.

"Your wife declares——"

"Oh yes—oh yes. I know what she declares. Well, these things are not to be threshed out in five minutes. Mr. Walker," he stopped short before George, "do you wish to marry Lesbia?"

"With all my heart and soul. We have come together again, and last night we renewed our love-vows."

"They should never have been broken," said Charvington impatiently.

"They never were, save by circumstances," said George solemnly. "Our hearts were always true," and he related the plotting of Maud and Walter Hale.

"Devils! Devils!" muttered Charvington, with another stamp, "and it's all my fault—all my fault."

"What!" George scarcely knew if he had heard aright.

"All my fault, I say." Charvington clutched his head with an expression of pain. "You do not know, you can't guess—you—you—never mind. I'll put an end to all this. You shall marry Lesbia and make her happy. I shall settle Hale once and for all. Come, what is your idea?"

"My idea," said George deliberately, "was, when I entered this room, to ask you to give me enough, as a loan, to marry Lesbia, so that I could take her to Australia or Canada and begin a new life. But now I have changed my mind, as I can guess that in some way you can arrange matters without my having to adopt such an extreme course."

"Yes," said Charvington quietly; "I believe that I can arrange matters and in a very surprising way. They should have been arranged long ago, only for the fact that I had not the courage. It is very hard to do right sometimes. But the time has come. Mr.

Walker, in three days certain people must be brought together into this room."

"What people, sir?"

"Walter Hale and Lesbia; yourself and your mother; Mr. Jabez and my wife. When we are all assembled I shall be able to straighten things, crooked as they are at present. I ask you to see that these people—saving my wife, who will be invited by me to be present—are here on the third day from now at three o'clock in the afternoon."

"And then?"

"Then you shall marry Lesbia and be happy ever afterwards. Now go."

George went without another word, wondering very much at the turn which events had taken. He had hoped that Charvington would arrange his destiny and that of Lesbia, but the old nobleman seemed able and ready to arrange the destiny of many other people. George could not entirely understand the meaning of Charvington's behaviour, and after a brief reflection did not attempt to. He decided to write a note telling Hale and Lesbia to be at The Court at the appointed time, and also to go personally to London to see Mr. Jabez and arrange for his presence. Having thus made up his mind what to do, George strode towards home whistling, with a load off his mind. In one way or another things would surely be put right.

Then came a surprise. While passing through Nightingale Thicket the young man saw Canning, looking more shadowy than ever, flitting down the road to meet him. But as the man drew nearer George saw that his usually pale face was flushed, that he was dressed spick and span as a gentleman, and that there was a general look of opulence about him. He glided up to Walker swiftly—for he appeared too unsubstantial to do anything save glide—and broke into a voluble explanation.

"Walker," he cried, and in loud tones which contrasted markedly with his usual whispering speech, "I came down this morning especially to see you. They told me you had gone to Charvington's place, so I crossed the river and walked in this direction on the chance of meeting you."

"What's your hurry?" asked George, surprised by this change of clothes and looks and manner.

"I am leaving England, and have come to say good-bye. Let us sit down on the grass by the roadside—no one will come along. After I have explained I shall push on to Maidenhead and take the train to London. From London I go to Italy. Yes, and old aunt of mine has remembered me in her will at the eleventh hour, and I have inherited two hundred a year, an annuity, the principal of which I cannot touch."

"Luckily for you," said George, taking out his pipe; "you would waste it."

"I daresay, I was always a wrong 'un. However, I go to Italy because there I can live like a fighting-cock on an income which means penury in England. I go also because Tait and Hale and the rest of them are making things too hot for me. But before departing I wanted to see you to confess."

George lighted his pipe and looked sideways in surprise. "Confess what?"

"That I assaulted you," said Canning nervously.

"You?" George glanced in amazement at the frail figure.

"Yes. Of course I took you by surprise, or you could have knocked me into a cocked-hat. You can punch me now, Walker."

"I don't want to punch you, as you put it," said George bluntly. "Of course you acted like a skunk in sneaking behind me and knocking me on the head, to say nothing of tying me up; all the same——"

"I tied you up," said Canning, who had lain down and was smoking a cigarette, "because I did not wish you to recover and get back to your cottage at Medmenham until I had secured the cross."

George turned indignantly. "Then you were the thief!" he declared.

"Yes," admitted Canning, coughing. "Kick me. I'll take it lying down."

"No," said George, after a pause; "you have done me a service through Lesbia, by preventing the success of Maud Ellis's plot. The evil you have done is counter-balanced by the good. But how did you get me into Rose Cottage?"

Canning sat up and looked puzzled. "I didn't do that," he said earnestly. "I left you trussed on the towing-path like a fowl, and how the deuce you got into the cottage I know no more than you do. Have you never found out?"

"No," said George promptly, "but I am beginning to find out many things, and it is just possible that I may solve that riddle also. By the way, why did you sneak the amethyst cross?"

"My brother wanted it."

"Sargent?"

"Yes. Hale came to Cookham on the evening when you proposed to Miss Lesbia, and told Alfred that she had given you the cross. Alfred insisted that I should rob you, and primed me with champagne to do what he wanted. I started for the cottage with a sandbag and a rope to stun you and bind you, hoping to take you by surprise. I saw you coming along the towing-path in the twilight, and then——"

"Yes," George cut him short, "I know the rest. You crept up behind me and stunned me and bound me, and then sneaked back to rob the cottage. You are a pretty bad lot, I must say."

"I am," said Canning languidly; "but now that I have enough to keep the wolf from the door I'll reform. Besides, you can kick me, as I said."

"I don't want to, you poor devil, since you have confessed and have done me a service. Why did you?"

"Because Miss Hale was the only human being who was ever kind to me," said Canning, throwing away his cigarette. "Oh, Walker, you don't know the terrible life I have had. I never was wicked, really I wasn't: only weak, and easily led. I hated myself all the time I was working for Alfred and those accursed wretches he associated with. I hated all mankind because I was treated so badly: but Miss Hale changed my nature by her kindness, and I did what I could to repair my wrong towards her and towards you. Because she loved you I have confessed because I want her to know the truth. Then I pass out of her life and yours for ever. Take this address in London," Canning handed him a card, "it will find me for the next week. After that I go to Italy. Tell Miss Hale everything I

have told you, and then ask her to write and say that she forgives me. I don't want her to think badly of me."

George nodded and slipped the card into his pocket, feeling very sorry for the miserable gentleman. "Only one question I should like to ask," he said, rising from the grass; "why did your brother want this cross?"

"Lady Charvington—as I found out from overhearing a conversation between them—asked him to get it."

George thought of the lie told by the lady as to the cross having been found by her in the library. "And why did she want it?"

"I can't say," replied Canning, moving away; "ask her. Good-bye. And Walker, my dear fellow," he added, "one last word. Maud Ellis and Hale are plotting to get that money which should come to your mother. Good-bye," and he disappeared down the road. That was the last George saw of Arthur Sargent, *alias* Canning, *alias* The Shadow.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PLOT

BUT that Canning fairly ran away George would have stopped him to ask further questions. He had told much which was new and strange and explained a great deal: but his last remark hinted at further difficulties.

Apparently, Hale had not yet given up all idea of procuring the money, although how he hoped to do so, in the absence of the child, George could not understand. Of course, Walker felt very certain that Hale had kept back the amethyst cross when sending the jewels to Lord Charvington but its production by Hale would have no effect on Mr. Jabez. The lawyer wanted the cross to be produced by the child of Katherine Morse—whatever her married name might be—and, according to Hale himself, the dying woman had no child. Mrs. Walker, indeed, had stated that her sister had written about a sick child, but this had probably

died. If not, surely during all these twenty years the child would have come forward to recover its inheritance.

George was naturally puzzled with this new development, and decided that to learn the truth it would be best to go to the fountain-head. That is, if Hale intended to use the cross to procure the money he would have to produce it to Mr. Jabez in his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. It was thus best to go at once to Mr. Jabez and inform him of what Canning had said about this new plot.

What Maud Ellis had to do with the matter it was impossible to say; George could no more understand her connection with it than he could understand why Lady Charvington had employed Captain Sargent to get her the cross. What possible interest could she have in the amethyst cross? And why had she told a deliberate lie about its being in the library? George was quite bewildered with the complicated state of affairs. And Jabez, as he believed, alone could solve the mystery.

George duly gave his mother Lord Charvington's message. She received it in silence, but with a change of colour, which did not escape his notice.

"Mother," he asked abruptly, "what do you know about Lord Charvington?"

"He was not Lord Charvington when I knew him," confessed Mrs. Walker, after a pause, "but Philip Hale. Hale, you know, is the family name, and Lesbia's father bears it as a cousin. Charvington had not come into the title some twenty and more years ago. I knew him very well and liked him," she sighed, "but he was always weak."

George looked incredulous. "Weak!" he echoed; "he seems to me to be a very strong man and one who knows his own mind."

"He has no doubt learned by experience," replied Mrs. Walker, "and Heaven only knows how badly he needed to learn. So he is going to speak at last. He should have done so long ago."

"About what, mother?"

Mrs. Walker pursed up her mouth. "Never mind, George, I prefer that Lord Charvington should tell his

own story. If he does, Walter Hale will find himself in trouble, and I shall be glad of that. I have waited long to see him punished : soon I shall be satisfied."

"Why do you hate Hale so, mother?"

"I have every cause to hate him!" cried Mrs. Walker vindictively, and her eyes glittered. "Years ago I loved Walter Hale."

"You—loved—that—man?" said her son slowly.

"What is there strange in that?" snapped his mother, trying to keep her restless hands still. "He was handsome and clever and persistent. I loved him, and I thought that he loved me. I gave him my heart, and found out only too late that he was playing with me. He was always cruel and wicked and hard, selfish to the core and thinking only of himself. We were engaged," added Mrs. Walker, drooping her head, and in a lower tone, "and he confessed then that he had very little money. He believed that I was an heiress, and so I was to the extent of fifty thousand pounds. My father did not like him and declared that if I married Walter he would cut me off with a shilling. I did not care, for I loved the man for himself: but he loved me for my money, and when he learned my father's decision he threw me over, and went after some other woman who was rich."

"Lesbia's mother?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Walker, pretending indifference; "but he vanished out of my life, and I heard that he was courting this heiress, in the hope of making a good marriage for his pocket. I was left alone, and I married your father Aylmer Walker not because I loved him, but because he was kind and sympathetic. Aylmer was a spendthrift and wasted all my money; all the same he was kind-hearted, and not a scoundrel like Walter Hale. Then you were born and shortly afterwards misfortunes came. I was only married four years when your father broke his neck, leaving me penniless. Then Kate eloped with"—Mrs. Walker paused—"she eloped, that is all I can say. I saw Walter Hale again and learned—and learned—Oh!" she rose and wrung her hands, "what a villain the man is! But he shall be punished now. I swear if Charvington will not punish him I shall punish him myself."

"But, mother——"

"Not a word," cried Mrs. Walker passionately, "I can't bear to discuss the matter. When we meet at Charvington's place, the long-hidden truth will come to light. Until then——" she stopped, closed her mouth, shook her head, and left the room hastily.

George wondered what could be the hidden truth she referred to, but could come to no conclusion. He wrote a letter to Lesbia saying that she was to come to Lord Charvington's place, and stating that he would call to take her over. Then he smoked a pipe and retired to bed, intending next day to go to London and see Mr. Jabez in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Mrs. Walker did not put in an appearance again on that evening. Of course George, as a lover, lay awake and thought of Lesbia. He was sorely inclined to postpone his visit to Mr. Jabez, and go over to Marlow on the morrow, but it was necessary to execute business before indulging in pleasure, since, when everything was settled, he would have Lesbia beside him always as his dear wife. He therefore restrained his longing for a sight of her face, and gradually dropped off to sleep.

Next morning Mrs. Walker had breakfast in bed and did not see her son. George left a message that he would return in the evening, and went to Henley in his boat to catch the midday train. He soon arrived in London, and without wasting time went to see Mr. Jabez.

The old lawyer had a large and expensive office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and from the number of clerks was apparently much sought after as a solicitor. He received Walker as soon as the young man sent in his card, as it seemed that George had luckily arrived during the slack season. "A week ago," said Mr. Jabez, in his precise way, "I should have had to keep you waiting for some hours."

The room in which Jabez received his client—as George was—was a large apartment with a painted ceiling and three long windows looking out on to the gardens of the square. Probably in Georgian days it had held brilliant company, but now, since the tide of fashion had rolled further to the west, it was given over to the dry-as-dust details of the law. Jabez looked

as hatchet-faced as ever, and still wore his large blue spectacles to aid his weak eyes. He welcomed George politely in his dry way, and waited to hear what the young man had to say.

"Lord Charvington wants you to come down to The Court the day after to-morrow at three o'clock," said George abruptly.

"Why?" demanded Jabez quietly, and more puzzled than he chose to admit.

"I can only answer you by telling you all that has taken place," answered the young man, and forthwith related what he knew.

Nursing his chin in the hollow of his hand, Jabez crossed his lean legs and listened quietly enough, nodding at intervals. "I thought it would come to this," he observed, when the young man ended.

"Come to what?"

"An explanation."

"Of what?"

"Of many things that will astonish you," said Jabez drily. "Of course I was acquainted with Lord Charvington when he was merely the Honourable Philip Hale. Then——" Jabez suspended further confidences. "It is best to allow Lord Charvington to speak for himself."

"Do you know what he intends to say?"

"Partly. And yet," mused the solicitor, looking at his neat shoes, "there may be something interesting which I do not know. However, the main point is that I shall arrange to be there at the stated time. The gathering promises to be interesting. The cross——" Jabez stopped. "H'm! yes, the cross. I see now how Hale got it."

"He stole it from Lady Charvington, who procured it from Sargeant, who employed Canning to thief it from me," explained George.

"So you said before; I am not so stupid as to require a double explanation," said Jabez crustily, "but I am wondering how Hale hopes to get the money by means of this cross. Certainly he declares that he has found the child, and——"

"What?" cried George, starting to his feet in amazement.

Jabez looked up and raised a hand. "Don't speak so loud, your voice goes through my head," he said in his testy manner. "Yes," he searched among some papers, "here is a letter from Walter Hale saying that he will call to-morrow at noon with the child of Katherine Morse——"

"Doesn't he mention my aunt's married name?"

"No," answered Jabez, sucking in his cheeks, "and that is what makes me suspicious of the affair. However, what you have told me to-day about Lady Charvington's share in the business and her husband's attitude gives me an idea. Send a wire to Lord Charvington asking him to meet you here to-morrow. Then you can both see Mr. Hale and this child."

"I should like to, but of what use——"

"There, there! I have no time to waste. Go and do what you are told," said Jabez, rising with an angry gesture. "I may be wrong and I may be right. But, putting two and two together——" he stopped and walked to the window, musingly, "yes, I believe it may be so."

"What may be so?" questioned George, picking up his hat.

Jabez wheeled crossly. "Oh, you are there still. Go away and send that wire. At noon to-morrow bring Lord Charvington here. Good-day," he rang the bell, "get out, young Walker; you are taking up my time."

Wondering at the behaviour of the lawyer, George departed and forthwith sent a prepaid wire to Charvington, asking him to come to the Lincoln's Inn Fields office. He had half a mind to go down and explain personally, but as he could not explain very much he relied on the wire, hoping that Charvington's curiosity would be sufficiently aroused to make him obey the summons. Late in the afternoon an answer came intimating that Charvington would be at Jabez's office at the appointed time. George was greatly pleased, as he foresaw that Hale's little plot would in some way be frustrated. Charvington apparently knew of much to Hale's disadvantage; hence the wily old lawyer had induced him to be present. Having come to this conclusion, Walker wired to his mother, saying

that he would remain in London, and employed his evening in going to a music-hall. He positively had to do so, for if he had remained alone in his hotel brooding over riddles which he could by no means solve, he felt that his brain would not bear the strain. Still, in a vague way, he felt that all things were being shaped to a happy end and that light was coming out of the darkness which had enshrouded things for so long.

At a quarter to twelve in the morning George met Charvington in the semi-courtyard in front of the mansion wherein Jabez had his office. The elder man jumped out of the hansom in which he had driven from the railway station, and walked towards the young one with an elastic step, after he had paid his fare.

"What's all this, Walker?" he demanded abruptly. "Why did you wire for me to come on this day, and at this hour, and to this place?"

"Come upstairs to Mr. Jabez and he'll explain," said George, leading the way up the steps, "we cannot linger here. Hale may see us."

"Hale?" Charvington followed hurriedly and caught the young man's arm. "And why is Hale coming here?"

"He has found—so he says—my cousin."

"Your—cousin?"

"My aunt's child—the heir to the property which Mr. Jabez has held for so long."

Charvington stopped on the landing. "So Hale is going to anticipate me," he muttered, and without waiting to be announced he opened the door of Jabez's private room and strode in. The lawyer looked up irritably.

"I'm engaged. You, Lord Charvington! Well, I might have guessed as much from your abrupt entry. You haven't changed much in your impulsive ways."

Lord Charvington threw down his hat and stick and gloves and flung himself into a chair. "I have changed very much in looks," he retorted; "however, there is no time for these personalities. Walker," he indicated the young man who had followed him closely, "tells me that Hale intends to produce the heiress to his aunt's property."

Jabez looked inquisitively at Charvington through his blue spectacles. "I believe so," he said quietly and cautiously, with a glance at his watch. "Hale will bring a girl here in a few minutes."

"It's a girl, then!" sneered Charvington.

"You mentioned the word 'heiress' yourself," remarked Jabez, with emphasis.

"A mere guess. And what of the cross?"

"Hale says that the girl will produce it."

"Humph! I don't believe that the girl will produce stolen property. You know that the cross was stolen from my house?"

"So I believe," said Jabez politely.

"Yes. Walker here told me, though in what way it got into my library——"

"I can tell you that now, Lord Charvington," interposed George, "as I heard the truth from Canning the other day. Sargent employed Canning to steal the cross in order to pass it over to your wife."

Charvington bounded from his chair. "What did she want with it?"

"I can't say—I don't——"

"Hush!" said Jabez, who, at the sound of wheels in the courtyard, had gone to one of the tall windows; "here come Hale and his heiress. Go into the next room with Walker, Lord Charvington. When I require you I shall summon you."

"But why do you bring me here at all?" demanded Charvington brusquely.

Jabez looked straight at him and his long fingers played a tune on the table. "I have an idea," he said gravely; "you may be able to tell me if that idea is correct."

"What is the idea?"

"I cannot tell it to you until I see this heiress."

"Very good." Charvington sat down again. "Introduce her and Hale."

"No, no!" said Jabez anxiously, "that would never do. Wait until I hear Hale's story, and then——"

"Hale will only tell you a pack of lies," interrupted Charvington violently. "And besides, he stole the cross and——"

Jabez pushed the angry speaker gently towards a

side door. "Go in there and wait," he said insistently. "You also, Walker."

"No!" cried Charvington, "I sha'n't."

"If you don't," said the solicitor very quietly, "I shall wash my hands of this matter. Already Hale and his heiress are waiting in the antechamber, and if your voice is recognised they will not come in."

"Why not?"

"Because I believe this is another of Hale's wicked schemes. Let me hear the whole invention he has made up, and then I can call upon you to substantiate the story."

"But I can't wait. I want to know who this girl is."

"Can't you guess?" demanded Jabez, leading him deftly to the door of the inner room where he wished him to wait.

"I can do more than guess—I know."

"Humph!" muttered Jabez, "I thought so."

"You thought what?"

"Never mind. If you know rightly, you will be able to help me."

Charvington stamped. "I believe it's all lies. I want to see this girl."

"Well," said Jabez resignedly, "I shall do a thing I have never done before, since you will not be quiet otherwise. In the panel of this door there is a small knot-hole. Look in and see if——"

Charvington rushed into the room, dragging Walker after him, and closed the door. Shortly afterwards they heard the entrance of two people. The old man applied an eye to the knot-hole. Then he laughed silently and made George apply his eye. "Look at the heiress," he said sneeringly.

Walker looked eagerly and saw—Maud Ellis.

CHAPTER XXIII

ONE PART OF THE TRUTH

It was indeed Maud Ellis who entered on the arm of Mr. Hale. She was carefully dressed and, as usual,

had made the best of her looks, such as they were. But she appeared to be anxious—to be strung up to fighting pitch—after the manner of a woman who anticipated that she was not going to get her own way without a battle. On her entrance, she measured the lean lawyer with the eye of an antagonist, and then sat down in the chair which he politely pushed forward. As to Walter Hale, he looked much the same as he always did—cool, polished, and composed. Of course, he was perfectly arrayed in Bond Street taste, and his manners were as irreproachable as was his costume. If Miss Ellis was nervous, Hale assuredly was not. To Jabez, he suggested a bowie-knife—an odd comparison, but one which came unexpectedly into the lawyer's unimaginative brain.

"You know, of course, Mr. Jabez," said Hale, when seated, "what I have come to see you about?"

The solicitor, who had taken his usual chair before the table, nodded and pointed to Hale's letter which lay on the blotting-paper before him. "To produce the amethyst cross," said he gravely.

"And something more important than the cross. Allow me," Hale stood up to give his words due effect, "to present to you Miss Katherine Morse——"

"Oh," interrupted Jabez drily, "I understood from you that she died in your Wimbledon house years ago."

"You are thinking of my mother," put in Maud boldly. "She, indeed, is dead; but I am her child and am called after her."

"Even to the name of Morse?"

"Later," said Hale, with dignity, "I can give you the married name of this young lady's mother. Meanwhile the cross is——"

"Is here," said Maud, and opening a little bag which was swinging on her wrist, she extracted therefrom a red morocco case and handed it to Jabez.

He opened it gravely and beheld the long-lost ornament. "It was my dear mother's," added Miss Ellis with feigned pathos, as though the sight was too much for her tender heart. "My grandfather gave it to her, and——"

"And your mother gave it to you," ended Jabez,

seeing with his usual keen gaze that her eyes were dry behind the handkerchief she was holding to them.

"No," she replied, unexpectedly and sadly, "I never set eyes upon it until Mr. Hale saw me a few days ago."

"Permit me to explain," said Hale, as watchful as a cat. "As I told you, Miss Morse——"

"Still no married name," muttered the solicitor ironically.

"That will be told later," remarked Hale, provokingly self-possessed. "I have first to tell my story."

"Go on," Jabez stretched his legs and put his hands into his pockets, "it is sure to be interesting."

"I hope so," said Hale, making a sign to Maud that she should not talk, "and already you know much of it."

"Let me see. Yes, I remember. You told me at Rose Cottage, in the presence of Mrs. Walker, that Miss Morse died at your Wimbledon house in the arms of your wife. She gave the cross to your wife, who afterwards gave it to the nurse Bridget Burke. She in her turn gave it to your daughter Lesbia, who presented it to young Walker, from whom it was stolen. Am I right?"

"Perfectly," said Hale gravely. "So you can see how Miss Morse here never set eyes on it until I brought it to her."

"And how did you become possessed of it?"

"I shall explain that when you have heard Miss Morse's story."

Maud put up her veil and wiped her lips. "I am only too anxious to tell it," she declared eagerly, "and——"

Jabez cut her short. "I am sure you are, but before hearing it I should like to remind Mr. Hale that he declared in my presence and in the presence of Mrs. Walker that there was no child."

"Quite so," said Hale promptly. "I am not bound to tell you anything I desire to keep hidden."

"I think you will have to do so, if you wish this young lady to get fifty thousand pounds," said Jabez coolly.

"Of course: that is why I am here. But I refer to the interview at my Marlow cottage. Then, I was not bound to speak. I speak now. There was not any child with Miss Morse when she died at my Wimbledon house. But with her last breath she told me where she had left the child—in a poor neighbourhood and with a poor woman."

"Who was very good to me," said Maud with tenderness very well acted. "Dear Mrs. Tait, shall I ever forget her kindness?"

"Tait! Humph! So that's the name, is it?"

"The name of my foster-mother who brought me up. For years I have been called Maud Ellis, but only when Mr. Hale came to see me, bringing the cross, did I learn my true name and parentage."

"Why did your foster-mother call you Ellis?" asked Jabez.

"She passed me off to the world as her sister's child," said Maud glibly.

"Why? I cannot see the need."

"Nor I," said Miss Ellis, with a swift glance at Hale. "But who knows the human heart, Mr. Jabez?"

"No one, so far as I know. But you were saying——"

"If you will permit me to tell my story, I can make everything clear."

"I am quite certain that you can," said the lawyer politely ironical. "Go on."

"Mrs. Tait kept a lodging-house in Bloomsbury. My mother lived there after leaving her husband—my father, who treated her very badly. I am right," she added, turning to Hale, "in saying this?"

"He behaved like a brute," said Hale emphatically, "but then he always was a brute, I am sorry to say."

"Dear me," murmured Jabez; "proceed, please."

"My mother left me with Mrs. Tait, as she had very little money, and went to seek out my father at Wimbledon one bitterly cold, snowy day. He turned her from his door and she nearly perished in the snow. Fortunately this good man," Maud glanced pathetically at Hale, who tried not to look too conscious, "took in

the starving and chilled woman. My mother died, and I was left to Mrs. Tait's kind care."

"What about the cross?" asked Jabez abruptly, stifling a yawn.

"I can explain that," interposed Hale quickly, "indeed I have already done so. It was given to my wife and——"

"Of course: of course, I remember now. Well," Jabez turned to Maud, "so you remained with Mrs. Tait."

"Until she died. Then her husband adopted me as his niece and with him I lived, retaining my name of Maud Ellis."

"There was a husband, then?"

"Yes," said Hale, anxiously, "you may know of him—Mr. Michael Tait, the stockbroking philanthropist."

"Oh," drawled the solicitor quietly, "the same man who lost his jewels the other day."

"Yes," admitted Hale, quite ignorant of how much Jabez knew, "the same. He was poor when Miss Morse—or Miss Ellis if you like—came to his wife, and Mrs. Tait kept a boarding-house to help him. Then Tait made a lucky speculation—he was a clerk in the City—and began to grow rich. But before he could make a fortune Mrs. Tait died and thus never benefited."

"No, poor dear, and she was so very kind," said Maud sweetly; "however, when my uncle grew rich——"

"Your uncle?" queried Jabez.

Maud coloured to the roots of her sandy hair. "I have fallen into the habit of calling my friend Mr. Tait my uncle. And, indeed, until the other day I almost thought that he was my uncle until I knew the truth. But as I was saying, Mr. Jabez, my uncle—for I still call Mr. Tait so—placed a magnificent tombstone over her remains when he grew rich. That is my story."

"A very interesting one," said Jabez politely. "Then I take it that you are the young lady entitled to fifty thousand pounds."

"I am. I understood that when I came and presented

that cross," Maud pointed to the ornament on the table, "the money would be given to me."

"You certainly said as much to me, Jabez," chimed in Hale anxiously.

"Quite right. The cross," Jabez waved his hand, "was only a little attempt of mine to introduce romance into the dry details of the law. Of course it is a means of identification, but it will be necessary for Miss Ellis to produce her certificate of birth, her baptismal certificate and——"

Hale bit his finger with vexation. "I anticipated that objection," he interrupted in hard tones, "and I knew you would make it."

"In the interest of Mrs. Walker I must make it."

"Yes, yes. But the fact is, that only Mrs. Tait, besides the mother, knew where the certificate of birth and that of baptism were to be found. They are both dead, as you have heard, so——"

"So," ended Jabez, rising to stand before the fireplace—"so there will be no chance of this young lady getting the money."

"Don't you believe my story?" demanded Maud angrily.

"Oh yes. One has only to look into your face, my dear madam, to be certain that you speak as you believe. But the law is not so tender-hearted as I am. The law requires proofs."

"The amethyst cross——"

"Is one proof, but others are required. Then, you see, the cross was stolen and has not been in your possession all these years. It is not a very strong proof of your identity."

"I can make an affidavit," said Hale sharply, "swearing that the mother told me where the child was to be found."

"Quite so, and doubtless Mr. Tait—then in the Bloomsbury lodging-house kept by his wife—can make another affidavit showing how the mother left the child in his wife's charge."

"Of course," assented Hale readily. "Tait will do anything I ask him."

"And my uncle," said Maud, "for I must call him

uncle, will only be too glad to see me come into my kingdom."

"Oh, I am certain of that," said Jabez, trimming his nails rapidly with a little knife; "and to show your gratitude, you will doubtless divide the money with him."

"Oh no. My uncle is too rich to need help," said Maud virtuously.

Jabez shut the knife and restored it to his pocket. "So he made enough by the double deal of the jewels and the insurance fraud to tide over the financial crisis which threatened him," he said deliberately.

Maud turned pale and uttered an exclamation. "I don't understand."

"Do you, Mr. Hale?" asked Jabez.

"No," said the man coldly; "I know nothing of Tait's business."

"Rubbish! rubbish! See here, Hale, and you, young woman, before you came here to try your games on me, you should have made certain that I knew nothing of your doings. As it is, from Mrs. Walker, from her son, and from various other people, I know all that has taken place in connection with that cross from the time Miss Lesbia Hale gave it to her lover, and——"

"You insult Miss Morse," interrupted Hale furiously.

"Miss Maud Ellis, you mean," sneered the lawyer, "and—no, you don't," he stretched out his long arm, and snatched the cross away, before Hale could lay a finger on it. "That belongs to Mrs. Walker's niece."

"I am Mrs. Walker's niece," panted Maud, standing up with a red and furious face. Since Jabez appeared to know so much, she saw very well that the plotting of herself and Hale had come to an untimely end. Nevertheless, like a woman, she persisted in fighting, even when the game had been irretrievably lost. "She will acknowledge me."

The lawyer slipped the case containing the cross into the pocket of his coat and faced round. "If Mrs. Walker will acknowledge you as her niece," he declared, "I will give you the money."

"What's the use of talking in this way?" cried Hale angrily. "You know well enough that Mrs.

Walker wants the money for herself. She will certainly not help this poor girl to gain her rights."

"Girl!" echoed Jabez cruelly, and with his eyes on Maud's plain face, which showed elderly lines. "I am no judge of a lady's age, but——"

"Brute! brute!" cried Miss Ellis, making for the door. "Hale, come away, I am not going to stand here and be insulted."

"I am coming," said Hale sullenly: then turning to the lawyer: "As to these veiled accusations you bring against me——"

"Oh, you want me to speak clearer. Very well, then. You, Mr. Hale, and you, Miss Maud Ellis, belong to a gang of clever thieves. The police have been trying to break up the gang for years, but hitherto have not succeeded. Now they will lay hands on one and all."

"Oh!" gasped Maud, trembling. "What nonsense you talk."

"The police do not think so. You and Hale had better make yourselves scarce, for one of your gang has given the rest away."

"Canning, blast him!" shouted Hale fiercely.

"Ah!" Jabez turned on him, "you admit, then, that I speak the truth?"

"I admit nothing," muttered Hale, wiping his face.

"As you please." Jabez moved towards the door leading into the inner room where Lord Charvington and George were concealed. "But Canning is now in communication with the police. I learned yesterday that he knew all. I got his address from young Walker, and have seen him. To save his own skin he will turn king's evidence, and you and Miss Ellis there, and her dear uncle and Sargent, and a few others, including Mrs. Petty, will be——"

"Damn you!" cried Hale, while Maud stood trembling at the outer door, which she had not strength enough to open, "I'll kill you."

With outstretched hand he lunged forward to grip the lawyer. Jabez, on the watch, dexterously slipped aside and flung open the door. Hale, unable to restrain his impetus, plunged right through the entrance into

the strong arms of George Walker. That young gentleman picked him up like a feather and, carrying him into the outer room, flung him into Jabez's chair. Maud uttered a cry of alarm. She did not know Lord Charvington; but she knew George, and guessed that he had overheard the whole wicked plot. Overcome with shame she tore blindly at the door, opened it hurriedly and fled away, pulling down her veil to hide her shameful face. She could not meet the eye of the man whom she had wronged so deeply, because she loved him too well.

None of the three men followed her, as their attention was taken up with Hale. Over him stood George, righteously indignant. "You confounded blackguard," cried George between his teeth, "if you were not Lesbia's father I would murder you."

"Set your mind at rest on that point, George," said Lord Charvington, who was strangely white, "I am Lesbia's father!"

"You!" George recoiled, dazed and startled.

"Katherine Morse was my first wife and I am Lesbia's father."

"Now," said George to Hale, "I can choke the wicked life out of you."

But Charvington stopped him. "Leave him to God."

CHAPTER XXIV

ANOTHER PART OF THE TRUTH

A DAY or so after the scene in the Lincoln's Inn Fields office, a party of those interested in the circumstances connected with the amethyst cross assembled in the library of The Court. George was present with Lesbia by his side—Lesbia, still ignorant of her true parentage. Mrs. Walker, looking less grim than usual, had a seat near Mr. Jabez who had come down to hear Lord Charvington's story and to witness the righting of the wrong which had been done to Lesbia. But two people who should have been on the spot were absent—Walter Hale and Lady Charvington.

On returning from London, where he had admitted the truth, Charvington had interviewed his wife. What took place between them was never known, for out of shame for the lady's behaviour Charvington said as little as he could when explaining fully. But his wife must have been dissatisfied with the conversation, for she left The Court and returned to London. In spite of what her husband said, she absolutely refused to be present at the rehabilitation of Lesbia, and it must be confessed that Charvington felt relieved. He knew his wife's fiery temper and vindictive nature well, and therefore dreaded lest she should make a scene. Besides he was manifestly in the wrong, and when given an inch Lady Charvington immediately took an ell with all the zest of an ungenerous woman. Mrs. Walker, having been the lady's schoolfellow, had something to say on the subject, but she reserved her remarks until she heard Charvington's story. She, for one, was not astonished at Lady Charvington's failure to put in an appearance at the conference. She had never credited her with a kindly heart willing to forgive and forget. And time proved that her estimate was right.

As to Hale, the interview in Jabez's office had more or less done away with the necessity for his presence. He admitted the truth of Charvington's statement to Jabez, and after confessing the whole of his wicked plots to gain possession of Mrs. Walker's money—or rather the money which now belonged to Lesbia as her mother's heiress—he had been permitted to depart. This he did, knowing that the police were on his track, and that unless he could get out of the country he would be in danger of arrest. And if he were arrested he knew well enough that he would suffer a long term of imprisonment. Destiny, as Mrs. Walker had remarked, had been very kind to him, but the hour had arrived when she demanded the return of all the good fortune which she had lent. And Hale lurked in by-ways, trembling for the payment of the bill which the police—as Destiny's agents—were trying to present. He did his best to give the police no chance of presenting it, and longed—like David—for the wings of a dove that he might fly away and be at rest.

But enough people were present to give Charvington

an opportunity of confessing his weakness and folly and, to be plain, cowardice, or, to be generous, want of courage. Only George and Jabez knew what he was about to say, as they already had heard the confession in the office. But Mrs. Walker and Lesbia were ignorant, and although they guessed that they had been brought there to hear how things could be righted, they little suspected the way in which this would be accomplished.

Lord Charvington glanced round at the attentive faces, and then abruptly plunged into the middle of his story. It was not an easy one for him to tell, and only sincere repentance made him bold enough to open his mouth. "I have to right a great wrong," he said with considerable emotion, "a wrong done to you, Lesbia."

"To me!" The girl looked surprised and clutched George's hand tighter.

"Yes! Listen. For you to understand I must go back over twenty years. You remember that time, Judith?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Walker quietly, "but you should go back nearly thirty years, Philip. George is now five-and-twenty, and I married his father some seven years previous to the time you speak of."

"I begin some twenty-three years ago," said Charvington, after a pause, "as it was then that I married your sister Katherine. Lesbia," he turned to the girl, "you are now twenty, I believe?"

"Yes, but what have I to do with——"

"You have everything to do with it," interrupted Charvington, "for I am your father, Lesbia—your guilty, cowardly, cruel father."

"What!" Mrs. Walker stood up slowly with a pale face and indignant eyes, "do you mean to say that this girl is my sister's child?"

"Yes, and as such inherits the money."

"I don't want it," said Lesbia, who was as pale as a wintry moon, for she could scarcely grasp the significance of her father's statement.

Mrs. Walker waved the objection aside. "I don't mind about the money," she said harshly, "and if George marries Lesbia the money is well bestowed.

But to think that you, Philip, should know the truth and conceal it. I always thought that you were more sinned against than sinning, Philip, as Hale was your evil genius. But if you knew that Lesbia was your daughter why did you permit her to call that wretch father?"

"I am about to explain," said Charvington, trying to speak quietly, "and I remember the time, Judith, when you would not have called Hale a wretch."

"I remember it also," said Mrs. Walker, sitting down, "a time when I loved the man. But you know, Philip, how he deceived me and left me and threw me into the arms of George's father. I can neither forgive nor forget the cruelty with which he treated me. And you allowed your own child—my poor Kate's daughter—to call him father. How could you? How could you?"

"I was wrong, Judith——"

"Wrong," she repeated strongly, "you were wicked and cruel. What induced you to arrange matters so? Why was not Lesbia given into my charge? I was her aunt; I had the right to look after her. But I expect you and Mr. Jabez made up the matter between you and——"

"Pardon me," said the lawyer politely, "but I knew nothing for ever so long, and if I had known, I should have given the money which I held in trust to Miss Lesbia Hale."

"Is my name Lesbia Hale?" asked the girl, who looked pale and scared.

"Yes," said her father, "Hale is my family name. You are Lesbia Hale, as your half-sisters are Agatha and Lena Hale."

"My half-sisters?" muttered Lesbia bewildered.

"Of course. Your mother was my first wife, and you are her child; Helen Harrowby is my second wife, the mother of Agatha and Lena."

"Helen Harrowby," said Mrs. Walker with scorn. "Oh, I know her well, better than you know her, Charvington, or you would never have married her."

"Heaven knows that I have learned to know her,"

said the man bitterly ; " but allow me to explain myself, and——"

" One moment," put in Jabez. " I wish to explain on my part to Mrs. Walker that I knew nothing of the truth for years. It was only when you, madam," he addressed himself directly to Mrs. Walker, " told me of the theft of the amethyst cross, and how your son had obtained it from Miss Hale, that I got an idea. I fancied—on account of the cross—that Miss Hale might be your sister's child, but Hale swore, if you remember, that there was no child."

" Yes," said George caustically, " and then tried to pass off Maud Ellis as the child so as to get the money."

" That plot was doomed to fail from the first," said Jabez, waving his hand, " as by then I knew too much. I did not like to declare my belief that Miss Hale was the missing child until I had further proof. In one way and another the proofs came to hand. When Lord Charvington appeared in my office at my request immediately before Hale called with Miss Ellis, I was then pretty well convinced that he was Miss Hale's father. I was right."

" But you knew for years that he had been my sister's husband," said Mrs. Walker, " and, knowing that, you should have asked him about the child."

" You knew also. Why did not *you* ask ? "

" Because, from Kate's letter to me saying that the child was dangerously ill, I believed that it had died "

" You told me that," said Jabez, " and I thought so also. Perhaps I have been blind and have not done justice to my legal training. However, the case is a very peculiar one. Let us hear what Charvington has to say, and then, if necessary, I can exonerate myself further."

Mrs. Walker moved her chair and caught Lesbia's disengaged hand. " I am quite ready," she said calmly ; " and before Charvington speaks, I must thank him for giving me back Kate's child."

Lesbia was too overcome to speak coherently, but muttering something unintelligible, she sat between the mother and son, her aunt and her cousin, allowing them to hold her hands, and feeling, poor child, that at last

she had someone to love her and cherish her and take care of her. Lord Charvington cast a longing glance at the trio. He would have liked to take Lesbia in his arms, but it was part of his punishment to see her cling to others, while he detailed the folly that had led to his isolation.

"When I was young," he said in a steady voice, and speaking slowly, "there were two people between myself and the title I hold. I was then merely Philip Hale."

"The Honourable Philip Hale," said Mrs. Walker promptly.

"No," he contradicted her; "no, Judith, my father was only a younger son. I had no title whatsoever until the death of my cousins by drowning placed me here at the head of the family. And I had no expectations then of becoming rich and titled. I was simply a briefless barrister."

"And Walter Hale's closest companion," muttered Mrs. Walker.

"Yes. But Walter was not so wicked in those days as he has since proved to be."

"He was always wicked," snapped the woman, "he was your evil genius."

Charvington passed his hand through his white hair. "I fear he was. However, we can talk of that later. Walter and I were the best of friends, and it was Walter who introduced me to Mr. Samuel Morse, a City merchant. He had two daughters. Judith——"

"That was me," murmured Mrs. Walker, "and the other daughter was my sister Kate. You loved Kate, and I thought that Walter loved me."

"Walter behaved very badly," said Charvington promptly. "He was poor while pretending to be rich, and so, when your father, not approving of his scampish ways, learned that you loved him, Judith, he threatened to disinherit you."

"Quite so; and learning that, Walter threw me over. Later, I married George's father, who was quite as scampish, but kind-hearted and honourable."

"Yes," Charvington nodded. "I always wondered why Mr. Morse permitted that marriage, as he knew that Walker was quite as wild as Hale."

"But he knew also that Aylmer was honourable, which Walter never was. Let that pass. I was jilted by Walter and married Aylmer. I lost my money and my husband, and was left with George to live on nothing. That's my story; I want to hear yours."

"You know most of it," said Lord Charvington, now speaking rapidly as though anxious to end a disagreeable task. "I loved Kate; she was the only woman I ever loved, but your father, thinking me as dissipated as Walter, refused to permit the match. Kate eloped with me, and your father would have altered his will but that he died before he could send for his lawyer."

"And that was me," said Jabez. "However, the will was very fair. You, Mrs. Walker, got your fifty thousand when you married your husband, and he soon got rid of it. The other fifty thousand pounds belonged to Kate, but she never appeared to get it. Why not?" he asked Charvington.

"Walter Hale again," said that gentleman quickly. "Kate and I were married and went on the Continent. I was poor and we lived quietly, hoping that some day Mr. Morse would relent. Then we heard that he had died. Walter undertook to find out about the will, and told us that Kate inherited nothing; that all had been left to you, Judith."

"And you believed him," said Jabez. "Why didn't you communicate with me?"

"I had no reason then to doubt Walter," said Charvington stiffly.

"Augh," groaned Mrs. Walker softly, "you were always an honourable fool."

"I was, in believing Walter," said Charvington, "and not until lately have I learned how I was deceived. Walter was always plausible and clever. Besides, I kept the fact of my marriage secret from my father lest he should disinherit me. Walter made capital out of that also. Then there was Helen——"

"Helen," cried Mrs. Walker, rising, much agitated. "She always hated me, and hated Kate because Kate was pretty and you loved her. Helen and Walter caused all the trouble."

"I know that now; I did not know it then," said

Charvington sadly. "I was always foolish, as you remarked just now. I was living in Paris with my wife. Lesbia was a baby then. We met Helen, who pretended to be our friend."

"A friend such as Walter was," muttered Mrs. Walker.

"I fear so, but let us say nothing since Helen is now my wife."

"You let her off too easily."

"She is now my wife," said Charvington determinedly, "so that puts an end to all discussion. Besides, Walter was to blame, as my wife informed me in a conversation we had when she refused to be present at this meeting. He worked on Kate's feelings and made her believe that I was in love with Helen. I was wrong also, for then I went about much with Helen, while my wife was ill, so that in the end Kate grew jealous."

"You treated her worse than I thought," said Mrs. Walker darkly.

Charvington threw out his hands. "I never was a hero," he said entreatingly, "but surely I have suffered for my weakness—the weakness of a pleasure-loving man. I was wrong; I here admit publicly that I was wrong. Surely you will believe that my repentance is sincere?"

Mrs. Walker looked at his drawn face and admitted that it was. After all, few men would have had the courage to stand up and speak as Charvington was now speaking—to lay bare the secrets of their weakness and strive, even at the eleventh hour, to make amends. Charvington had sinned through weakness; he confessed through strength gained from the lessons of a hard life, hard in spite of his outward show of prosperity. "I forgive you," said Mrs. Walker in softer tones, "go on."

"I come to the cruellest part," said Charvington in a thick voice. "Kate was so jealous that she fled with the child. I searched for her but could not find her. It was in winter. Then Walter sent for me. I came to England, and he told me that Kate had come to him weak and ill and almost starving. She had sold what jewels she possessed to feed herself and her child, and

only retained the amethyst cross which her father had given her. Then she went to Walter at Wimbledon, and there died in the arms of Bridget Burke."

"Was Mr. Hale married then?" asked George anxiously.

"No. He never married in his life. But when I arrived my wife was buried and had left the child to the care of Bridget, and also had given her the cross, saying it was to be handed to Lesbia when she grew up."

"Bridget gave it to me on her death-bed," sighed Lesbia, who wept bitterly.

"Yes, I learned that," said Charvington with a heavy sigh. "But to go back to my story. I repented deeply of the way in which I had behaved. I meant no harm, and would have explained to my wife had she not left me secretly. I never had an opportunity of explaining. Kate simply disappeared and died. Owing to my conduct I did not dare to go near you, Judith, or I might have placed the child in your care. As it was, Hale proposed that Lesbia should be nursed by Bridget and that I should allow him money. I agreed to this, as at the time it seemed the best way out of the difficulty. Then my cousins were lost at sea in their yacht. I came in for a large income and for the title. My relatives urged me to marry again. Chance threw me once more into Helen's company

"Chance!" snorted Mrs. Walker. "Chance! I know the minx."

Charvington passed over this remark. "I married Helen and took up the station I now hold. I arranged to allow Walter an annuity if he looked after Lesbia. He did so, and gradually she began to look on him as her father."

"And you permitted that—you permitted that?" cried Mrs. Walker furiously.

"Yes," said Charvington with an effort. "Weakness again. My wife knew the truth and I did not dare to bring my child into the house. I provided that Lesbia should have a good education, and saw that she had everything she desired. Walter was kind to her in his own way. Gradually I came to accept the situation.

Then the cross passed into Walker's possession, and—" he threw out his hand—" you know the rest."

George nodded. " But how did Lady Charvington learn the truth, and why did she want the cross ? "

Charvington sighed again and hung his head. " I do not wish to speak ill of my wife," he said in a low voice ; " but in justice to Lesbia I must be frank. Hale learned about the money waiting for Lesbia, and knew that it could be obtained if the cross was shown to you Jabez. But Hale could not find the cross."

" I know why," said Lesbia quickly. " Bridget kept it secretly beside her as my mother thought that Mr. Hale"—she did not say father—" might take it away. My mother told Bridget that the cross would prove that I was her child should any money be waiting for her. Bridget gave the cross to me and made me promise to say nothing to Mr. Hale, but to give it to the man I loved. While I was giving it to George, Mr. Hale came, and then——"

" Then," said Lord Charvington, " he went to Cookham and told Sargent that you, Walker, had the cross. My wife had already learned through Sargent, who obtained the information from Hale, that if Lesbia produced the cross she would inherit a fortune. Then—she——" he hesitated.

Mrs. Walker took up the explanation. " I can see it all," she said scornfully. " Helen hated Kate so that she was determined that Lesbia should not get the money, and hired Sargent to get the cross. He did, through his brother. We know all about that. But did Helen know that Sargent was a thief ? "

" No," said Charvington sharply. " Helen is not altogether bad. She did not know of that, nor did she ever suspect that Walter was such a rascal. I was amazed myself when I heard the truth. I only learned it during the last few weeks. But you can see how the cross came into my wife's possession."

" Yes," said George, " but why did she tell the lie about its being in the library ? "

" To conceal the fact of how she came to get it, as she knew perfectly well that Sargent had obtained it in some underhand way. She guessed that, if she

swore I had given her the cross, no inquiry would be made, and of course," he added apologetically, "as my wife, I should have been obliged to support her."

"Philip," cried Mrs. Walker, rising, "you are as weak as ever."

"No," denied the man, "I am strong. Things being as they are, I must make the best of them. Helen is my wife, and to save the honour of my name all that I have told you must be kept silent."

Mrs. Walker shrugged her stately shoulders. "I shall say nothing," she observed, "neither will anyone else. As to Walter, he can be left to the punishment of the law. But I am certain," she added, with emphasis, "that as he knows everything, he will speak if only out of revenge."

Charvington winced. "As I have sown, so must I reap," he murmured. "Let us hope that out of shame Walter will be silent and not add to my burden, which is already sufficiently heavy. If I have sinned through weakness, I have repented and I have been punished."

Mrs. Walker offered her hand. "You shall not be punished further by me," she said generously; "you were always good and kind, Philip, but very weak. I held my tongue about you, and I shall hold it still. As to Walter——"

"Oh!" said Jabez, rising, "I daresay I shall find some means to square him. In the interests of all parties it will be best to give him a sum of money and assist him to escape. Once abroad he will say nothing, besides which he will not dare venture back to England. You forget, Lord Charvington, that although he has a hold on you by knowing so much, you have a hold on him by what you know. Now if I——"

"Do what you think best," said Charvington, whose hungry, bloodshot eyes were fixed on Lesbia. "I give you full permission. But, my child——" he held out his arms to Lesbia, who rose pale and trembling—"will you not forgive me?" said the man in a thick voice. "I have done you wrong, but I have suffered and I will make amends, and I—I——"

Lesbia ran forward and threw her arms round his

neck. "I forgive you," she whispered, "and I will learn to love you, and—and—Father!"

Her voice rose in a scream. Unable to bear the joy of this forgiveness, a long-threatened attack of apoplexy seized on the man's weakened frame. He tried to speak, choked, grew purple in the face, and fell full length on the floor from the arms of the daughter he had not acknowledged for so many years.

CHAPTER XXV

REVENGE

A WEEK later, and George was seated beside Lesbia on the well-known bench under the famous chestnut tree. Lord Charvington had recovered from his apoplectic fit, and was now progressing favourably. For two or three days Lesbia and Mrs. Walker had nursed him; but when Lady Charvington heard of her husband's illness she came down to The Court at once. A furious passage of arms took place between her and Mrs. Walker, which resulted in the defeat of the latter lady. Her enemy, being Charvington's wife and mistress of the house, had the power to send away those whom she regarded as interlopers, and she exercised this power forthwith. Lesbia departed under Mrs. Walker's wing, and Charvington was too ill to prevent his wife from behaving in this despotic manner.

Mrs. Walker desired the girl to come to Medmenham, there to remain until such time as she could be married. But Lesbia, thinking of Tim, insisted on returning to Rose Cottage. Jabez allowed her sufficient money to live on, pending his handing over to her the invested fifty thousand pounds, so there was no difficulty on the score of money. Then it was unlikely that Hale would come back to see Lesbia, now that she knew the truth; and under the charge of the devoted Tim she could remain quietly until George found occasion to make her his wife.

But there was another reason why Hale could not come. He was in hiding, for the information given

to the police by Canning—forced, in order to save himself, to turn king's evidence—had resulted in the arrest of Tait and Mrs. Petty and several members of the infamous gang, whose names Canning had supplied. But Hale had managed to escape, likewise Captain Sargent, who had been warned by Maud. That clever young lady, having seen at Jabez's office that the game was up, did what she could to put the rest of the gang on the alert, and then vanished like a bubble. Things were in this position when George sat hand in hand with Lesbia under the chestnut tree discussing the future.

"I saw Lord Charvington yesterday," explained the young man, "and he is now rapidly getting better. He proposes that we shall get married next month and accompany him to the South of France. He has a villa there which he will place at our disposal."

"And Lady Charvington?" asked Lesbia timidly.

"Your stepmother," said Walker, smiling.

"No," said Lesbia, shuddering, "don't call her that."

"Why not? She has behaved exactly as a step-mother does—in fiction."

Lesbia shook her head. "I think of her merely as Lady Charvington—a stranger—and when we are married I shall never set eyes on her again."

"I don't think she wants to see you," said George drily. "She is still vindictive. It seems that she always loved your father and could never forgive your dead mother for having married him. Thus she visits her anger upon you, my dear. However, what she does or what she says matters little. And for her own sake she will say as little as possible."

"She is a strange woman," sighed Lesbia, "and very unhappy."

"Don't make any mistake, my dear. Lady Charvington is too hard-hearted to be unhappy. So long as she has her rank and her title, and her crowds of adorers, she cares for no one. Whatever love she may have had for your father she has long since given entirely to herself."

"Do Agatha and Lena know that I am their half-sister?"

"No. I was talking about that yesterday to Lord Charvington. As you know, he has not been able to do anything because of his illness, but he is only waiting to get on his feet again to put matters straight."

"In what way?" asked the girl anxiously.

"Well, you are his daughter, my dear, and he desires to acknowledge you as such in the most public manner."

"No," said Lesbia firmly and sadly, "that would be useless and would do no good. Such an acknowledgment would only lead to a lot of questions being asked by my father's friends, and then the whole unhappy business would be raked up. I don't want my miserable story to be published in the papers, especially as Mr. Hale's name is so notorious. Let me marry you quietly, my dear, and then we can go away to France with my father for a few months. I have you, I have the money left to me by my mother, and I have found my real father—the rest matters very little."

George kissed her. "You wise little darling," he said admiringly; "I think your decision is exactly what I should expect from your commonsense way of looking at things. I agree with you that it is best to let sleeping dogs lie, and not to stir up muddy water, and not to—to—what other proverb shall I use, Lesbia?"

"'Let the dead past bury its dead,'" she replied, seriously. "We have had much trouble, and we have been parted. Now the troubles appear to have come to an end and we are together. Let us marry and enjoy our good fortune and be happy in our own small way."

"Amen! amen! amen!" said George, laughing; "and indeed I think we deserve the good fortune, for we did not refuse to bear the cross."

"And so have gained the crown of perfect love," said Lesbia contentedly as she nestled in her lover's arms.

The garden was still brilliant with many-hued roses, and the river murmured a joyous song as it flowed tranquilly under the deeply blue summer sky. But the blackbird and his mate had gone away with their brood and the nest was deserted. Still other birds remained and other birds were singing lustily of summer joys. Basking in the warm sunshine, contented

with each other's company, George and Lesbia passed into that hour of silence which speaks of love so deep that no speech is needed. They listened to the birds, to the river, to the whispering of the breeze, and dreamed of a future that would always be happy. They were together, they understood each other, so nothing else mattered.

But their golden hour was disturbed by Tim, who hobbled down the pathway with a distressed look on his ugly, kind face. The two expected him, so the arrival was not an intrusion. For several days Lesbia had insisted that Tim should explain how much he had known of the many disgraceful things lately found out. Hitherto Tim had evaded an explanation, but on that morning he had gravely promised to tell what he knew. Therefore, when he halted before the dreaming couple, George roused himself.

"Here is Tim, my darling," he said with a laugh; "put him in the witness-box."

"Ye might say the confessional, Masther Garge," replied Tim, squatting on the dry grass and looking like a good-tempered gnome. "What is it ye want to know, me darlin' heart?"

"About my father—that is about Mr. Hale," said Lesbia, who had been addressed.

"The bands av death on him," muttered Tim, using an ancient Irish oath. "Sure, I knew he wasn't any kith or kin av yours, miss, though by the same token I nivir rightly knew as his lardship was yer father."

"Tim," said his young mistress severely, "you told Mrs. Walker in my presence that there was no child with the poor lady who died at Wimbleton."

"Is ut yer mother ye talk av, miss?" asked Tim innocently. "Sure, ut was lyin' I wor, an' if I hadn't lied, that divil—ut's the masther I mane—wud have brought throuble on ye."

"In what way, Tim?" asked George, looking puzzled.

"Augh, nivir ask me, sor. But wasn't I always listenin' and pokin' an' pryin' when that divil—ut's the masther I mane—had thim dirthy tatterdemalions here? Thaves they wor, an' spies, an' resavers av stolen goods, bad luck to thim! The masther caught me wan

night an' larned as I knew av the divilmments he wor indulgin' in. An' ses he, 'Tim,' ses he, 'if ye breathe wan wurrd I go to gaol, an' by the same token I'll see that Miss Lesbia goes wid me. Well ye know,' ses he, 'as she lies whin callin' me her father, but if ye tell her I am not,' ses he, 'it manes gaol fur us both.' Augh!" Tim rocked in much distress, "an' what cud I do, miss dear, me not knowin' the true father av ye?"

"And if you had known, Tim?" asked Lesbia anxiously.

"If I'd known as his lardship wor yer father," said Tim emphatically, "I wud have gone on me bare shinbones to ask him to take ye out av this divil's house. But me masther—bad luck to him!—lied like a father av lies, as he'll some day go to, an' being in the dark as it wor, I didn't dare to let a mouse's squeak av what I knew come to yer purty ears, miss."

"But you hinted that the cross would bring trouble, Tim?"

"I did that, miss. Sure, whin the mother that bore ye died in the arrums av me own mother she guv the crass, 'An',' ses she wid her last gasp, 'let me choild have it, whin she grows up, to prove as she's me lawful choild. An' if there's money comin',' ses she, 'though, be the same token, me sister has got it all, the crass may git it fur the choild. But nivir let her see her father,' ses she, 'for a bad man he's been to me.'"

"Not altogether bad, Tim," said Lesbia gently; "my mother was deceived. Did she tell Bridget my father's name?"

"No, miss," said Tim promptly, "had she towld, I'd have larned it whin me own mother died, and thin I'd have asked his lardship to take ye from this divil—ut's the masther I mane. But me mother sid nothin' for she knew nothin', save what she towld ye about the crass, 'An',' ses me mother to me whin she guv ye the crass, 'there'll be throuble over yon crass,' ses she, 'fur th' Sight's on me, being near me latter end,' ses she. 'Throuble there'll be over the crass, an' sorrow an' tears an' sudden death. But thim who love will win clear and thim as is bad will come to the black grave.'"

"There has been trouble certainly, Tim," said Lesbia, sighing, "and the cross both began it and ended it, as your mother declared it would. But now, thank God," she turned to place her arms round George's neck, "it's all over and we shall have no more. Your mother prophesied rightly, Tim, save that there has been no sudden death or black grave, and there isn't likely to be."

Tim rocked and shook his huge head. "Thim as is goin' to their long rest secs things as thim aloive can't get a squint at. Me mother foresaw th' sorrow an' tears av th' crass an' the joy which ye an' Masther Garge there have now, good luck to both av ye! So the sudden death an' the black grave will come, I doubt not. But here, me dears," said Tim, after a pause, "there's wan thing ye don't know as I'll tell ye."

"And what is that?" asked George, smiling.

"'Twas me, Masther Garge, as carried ye from the river bank to the room in yonder," Tim nodded towards the cottage. "I wor out fishin' an' I saw ye in the moonlight lyin' on the path, though be me sowl I nivr dreamed 'twas you. I rowed ashore an' found ye stunned an' bound, bad luck to the divil who did ut! I tuke ye into the cottage and called softly to the young misthress there. She thought 'twas a drame an' come down to see to you. An' now ye know, both av ye."

Lesbia and George looked at one another in astonishment. "Why didn't you tell us this before?" asked Walter sharply. "And why did you bring me to the cottage?"

"Sure now," said Tim in injured tones, "didn't I think as 'twas the masther had been up to some divilment, and didn't dare spake in case he'd get Miss Lesbia clapped into gaol 'longside him? But I knew as the masther wud nivr dare to harrum ye in his own house wid Miss Lesbia by the side av ye, an' so I brought ye here into his very jaws as it wor. An' wasn't I right, me dear sor?"

"Yes," assented Walker promptly, "I think you were. It was very clever of you to protect me in that way, even though it was Canning and not Hale who assaulted me. Well Lesbia," he turned to the girl.

"here is another thing made clear. Quite a surprise."

"I hope it is the last surprise," said the girl, wearily ;
"I am very tired of being surprised."

"In that case," said a smooth voice at her elbow,
"you will be tired at seeing me."

Lesbia started to her feet with a cry, and George with an exclamation of astonishment. As to Tim, he scrambled to his feet with an oath. "Augh, murder ! murder !" cried the Irishman, "it's the black divil his own self."

"That's complimentary," said Hale, who was standing calm and composed near the lovers. "You were so busily engaged talking, Lesbia, that you did not hear me come down the path."

"How dare you come here ?" said the girl indignantly.

"It's my own house. I had the key," retorted Hale coolly. "I opened the front door and entered. Finding no one within, I came here, and find that Tim is giving me away. But I am not so black as I am painted."

"You are much worse, I daresay," said George bluntly.

"Oh, you're there, you lucky young man," said Hale, raising his eyebrows. "I congratulate you on marrying Lesbia and on getting the money."

Hale sat down on the bench with a sudden look of fatigue. He was cool and smiling and bore himself both shamelessly and dauntlessly. But it was apparent that he behaved thus out of bravado. In spite of his boldness, and of the fact that he was dressed as carefully as ever, he was thoroughly ill and had his back to the wall.

"You had better leave this place," said Lesbia, clinging to her lover, "the police are hunting for you."

"Someone else is hunting for me," said Hale gloomily.
"Maud Ellis is on my track swearing vengeance."

"Why should she ?"

"Because, to get the money and induce her to play her part, I promised to marry her. I have no intention of doing so. Then again, for my own safety, I have sent a communication to the police offering to tell all I know about Tait and his gang on condition that I

am let off. Maud, confound her, has found this out, and swears to have my life ! ”

“ She could scarcely go so far as that,” said George scornfully.

“ Oh, I think so,” said Hale quietly. “ She can’t show herself, as she is in danger from the police also, and so will revenge herself as she best can. I don’t think there’s much she would stick at. I caught sight of her on the London platform as I came down this morning, so I expect she will follow me to this house. There will be trouble unless you can aid me to get away.”

“ How can we compound a felony ? ” asked George, frowning.

“ It is better than to see a tragedy,” retorted Hale “ I am not afraid of Maud unless she takes me by surprise ; but that is just what she will do. I am not your father, Lesbia, as you know now, and perhaps I have not been kind in my treatment. All the same, I ask you to exercise that kind nature which you always declared you possessed, and give me fifty pounds to get abroad with. Once across the Channel I can shift for myself.”

“ I have not got fifty pounds,” said Lesbia, hesitating. Badly as Hale had treated her, she yet wished to assist him, and truly he was in great need of the coals of fire which she could heap upon his head.

“ You can soon get it,” said Hale eagerly. “ Charington will give you anything. Send Walker to ask him for the money, and I can remain concealed in the cottage until he returns.”

The lovers looked at one another. Both were inclined to assist the miserable man, little as he deserved kindness at their hands. Tim, with a grim face, stood neutral, but being of a less forgiving nature, would gladly have pitched his old master into the river had Lesbia but lifted a finger. But she gave no sign, so Tim waited. It was hard to say what would have happened had not Fate decided the matter.

The four people in the garden were so deeply engaged in conversation that they did not observe a boat cross the river from the opposite shore, some distance above the garden. Tim, indeed, did catch a glimpse of a craft

holding two people, but did not take much notice. The boat reached the near shore and then dropped down alongside the bank until it was directly abreast of the chestnut tree. Then, for the first time, George and Lesbia looked round at the sound of dipping oars. Hale raised his head and looked also. The next moment there was the sharp report of a revolver, and he rolled off the bench shot through the breast. Twice again the revolver spoke, and twice Hale was wounded. Maud Ellis was a sure shot.

"There," cried she, flinging the weapon ashore to Lesbia, "you can finish him off. He betrayed my uncle, he betrayed me, he betrayed us all. Only Sargent, who is rowing for me, and I have escaped. Good-bye, Lesbia; you have your lover—my lover—the man I adore. I hope you'll be happy. I have done justice on that blackguard, so I am going to clear. You'll never see me again, and you can thank your stars that I did not kill you as well as that scoundrel there. George—good-bye—good-bye."

She sat down quickly in the boat, which was already receding rapidly from the garden. Sargent apparently had not expected that Maud would have been so thorough in her vengeance, and could be seen talking angrily to her. He rowed with all his might across the river, let the boat drift down-stream and leaped ashore. Maud followed alertly and the two set off running rapidly. Where they went or how they escaped, George never knew; but that was the last seen of them in England. Meanwhile Lesbia was on her knees beside the wretched man who had done her so much harm, striving to stanch his wounds with her handkerchief. Tim already had run up the path shouting for the police, and George was about to follow, as he wanted Maud to be arrested for her dastardly crime, when Hale opened his eyes.

"Are you there, Lesbia?" he asked faintly. "It's no use my asking for your forgiveness, as I hate being a sneak at the last moment. I have lived bad and I shall die bad. But I can say this, that you are the sole human being I regret having injured. You are a fool, as you have always been, like your father—but you are a sweet fool. And I—I——" he choked.

"Hush! hush!" said Lesbia distractedly. "George, take him into the house, and fetch the doctor. We must save him——"

"No," gasped Hale with a flash of energy, "don't save me to let me rot in gaol. Maud has done me a good turn after all. I die and—and I cheat—I cheat the law," he opened his eyes again and stared at the two pale faces, and then smiled. "God bless you," he gasped, "oh, to think that I should bless——" he laughed, but the effort was too great, and he fell back dead.

At the same moment Tim came running down with a policeman at his heels.

"It's too late, Tim, he is dead," said Lesbia faintly.

"Dead, is ut?" muttered Tim, staring and crossing himself. "Then me mother wor right in all she said. Sudden death and the black grave. Augh! Sure, 'twas the truth me mother spake afther all."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE END OF IT ALL

THE villa owned by Lord Charvington at Nice was beautifully situated, beautifully furnished, and beautifully built. Endless money had been spent upon it to make it as perfect as any human habitation could be. Lady Charvington was particularly fond of it, and her extravagance was evident both in the house and in the lovely gardens. Great was her rage when she heard that her husband had invited George and his young wife and her arch-enemy Mrs. Walker to stay there with him. But she was even more angry when she learned that Charvington had made a free gift of the villa to his daughter.

"His conduct has always been atrocious," said Lady Charvington to Jabez, who was the sole person to whom she could speak of such things, since for her own sake she was forced to hold her tongue to the world at large, "but this is the worst thing he has ever done. How dare he give my villa to that horrid girl?"

"He has every right to," said Jabez drily, "as the villa is Lord Charvington's own property. And I beg leave to state that I do not consider young Mrs. Walker a horrid girl. She is very sweet, and is bearing her good fortune as modestly as she bore her bad luck bravely."

"I hate her," said Lady Charvington fervently.

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because I hated her mother. I always loved Charvington, and she took him from me."

"But you got him in the end," Jabez reminded her.

"Got him. Yes, I got the rags and tatters of the passion he had for that detestable Kate Morse. I never forgave her while she lived, and I certainly shall not forgive her now she is dead."

"Very good; but you needn't hate her daughter," expostulated Jabez earnestly. "Consider how unhappy the poor girl has been, and through no fault of her own. Even now—in deference to her own wish, I admit—she is not acknowledged by her father, publicly at least."

"I don't care," cried Lady Charvington, with all the venom of an angry woman. "I hate the girl, and I shall always hate her. But I didn't come here to listen to your views, Mr. Jabez. What I wish to know is if I can insist that my villa shall be given back to me."

"No," said Jabez, and very glad he was to be able to reply in the negative; "the villa was never settled on you, and Lord Charvington has a perfect right to deal as he pleases with his own property."

"It is my property, and Charvington's a brute. I wonder that I ever loved him—indeed I do," cried the lady vehemently. "And to think of that horrid girl getting the husband she wanted and the fifty thousand pounds, and my villa, and—Oh!" she stamped, "it makes one doubt if there is a Providence."

"I fear," said Jabez gravely, as she rose to depart, "that some day, if you bear such ill-will towards one who has never injured you, you will find there is a Providence."

"Pooh! pooh! That's all goody-goody talk," said

Lady Charvington contemptuously. "But that I have to think of Agatha and Lena, I should get a separation from my husband. As it is, I shall spend as much money as I can, and enjoy myself in my own way. I don't want to see him."

"I fancy you'll see very little of him," said Jabez drily, as he accompanied her to the door. "Lord Charvington is fond of a quiet life. All you have to do is to enjoy your position and the ample income which he allows you, and hold your tongue about these family troubles."

"Oh, of course you are on his side!" cried Lady Charvington in a rage. "I really believe that you suggested he should give that nasty girl my villa."

"Pardon me," said the solicitor, skilfully dodging the question, "it never was your villa."

"It was, and she has stolen it. I only hope she'll be as thoroughly unhappy as she well can be, with the fool she's married and her disagreeable mother-in-law. Judith was always horrid."

"I fear you will be disappointed. Young Mrs. Walker adores her mother-in-law, and is adored in turn. They are, as you know, all at the villa with Lord Charvington, and, as I gather, perfectly happy."

"How disgusting!" cried Lady Charvington vindictively. "But I shall wait for the interference of an overruling Providence. Some day the sins of the lot of them will come home to them, and they will be thoroughly miserable."

"And your ladyship's sins?" inquired Jabez very gravely.

"Sins?" she stared, "I have none!" After this speech, which completely silenced the lawyer, so taken aback was he by its amazing impudence, she took her departure. All the same she also took his advice, and said nothing of what had happened in connection with the affairs of the amethyst cross. And in time—as she could not keep up a hostile attitude for ever—she found it politic to smooth over things with her worried husband. But she never forgave Lesbia to her dying day.

Not that Lesbia cared. She was absolutely happy with her husband and mother-in-law and father at the

villa. The income derived from her mother yielded over two thousand a year, and this had been supplemented by Lord Charvington, anxious to make amends. What with a large income and a lovely villa, and a handsome and affectionate husband, Lesbia was very fortunate indeed, and felt quite glad that she had gone through so much trouble to get to such a goal. Something of this sort she said to her father one evening after dinner.

The party were seated on the terrace which overlooked the deeply blue waters of the Mediterranean. At the moment, these were dyed with rosy hues from the setting sun. Mrs. Walker, looking much less stern and much more composed, was seated in a deep arm-chair near Lesbia, whom she could scarcely bear out of her sight. Lord Charvington, now looking wonderfully hale and hearty—for it was six months since his attack of apoplexy—sat near a small round table upon which stood coffee and liqueurs. George lounged about with a cigar, casting looks of affection on Lesbia. The quartette, arrayed in evening dress amidst beautiful surroundings, looked thoroughly happy and well-to-do. After the storm had come the calm, and when recalling the storm, as sometimes she could not help doing, Lesbia always spoke cheerfully.

"The trouble was worth going through to come to this," she said, smiling in a happy manner.

"I think so too, dear," observed George, who was always hovering in her vicinity. "And I think we have learned the lesson which those very troubles were sent to teach."

"What lesson?" asked Lord Charvington lazily.

"To trust in God."

"Yes," said Mrs. Walker, who was knitting, "you and Lesbia have learned that, and I have learned a lesson also. I have learned to be more sympathetic and more liberal-minded. We are all mortal, and no one has any right to judge another person, not knowing that person's temptations."

"Do you allude to Walter?" asked Charvington.

"Yes. He behaved badly, I allow; but then his will was not strong enough to struggle against the evil that was in him. And after all," Mrs. Walker laid

down her knitting, "he was terribly punished. He was snatched out of life unprepared. I hope he has found mercy. But the evil that he did lived after him. Alas, alas!"

"I think Tait and his gang found that was so," said George grimly. "From what was said at the trial, it seemed that Hale was the soul of the gang, even though Tait posed as the head. Canning, of course, escaped because he turned king's evidence, and is now in Italy; but Tait got a long sentence."

"Mrs. Petty and the rest of the gang also," observed Charvinton; "but Maud Ellis and Alfred Sargent escaped."

"They were very lucky," said George reflectively. "The police, advised by Tim, were on their track almost at once, but they never caught them. As they were not disguised, I wonder that they ever escaped."

"Hale was not disguised either, I heard you say," remarked Charvinton. "It seems to me that audacity favoured the lot of them. Hale would have escaped also, I doubt not, had he not been shot by that wretched woman."

"Why do you shudder, George?" asked Mrs. Walker, at this point.

"I am thinking how easily she could have shot Lesbia," said George reluctantly. "She had two or three shots left after she polished off Hale. But she flung the revolver ashore and made a sentimental speech wishing myself and Lesbia good luck. I should have thought—but there," George sighed, "no man can understand a woman."

"No woman can understand a man," said Lesbia, laughing. "But I am glad Maud did not shoot me. Where is she now?"

Charvinton removed his cigar. "I have reason to believe, from facts which came to Jabez's ears, that she has married Alfred Sargent and is engaged in making trouble in a South American republic."

"Sargent is not strong enough to do much," objected George.

Mrs. Walker shook her head. "I believe Alfred Sargent was a much cleverer man than his appearance warranted," she said sharply. "He looked like a fool,

but he acted like a wise man. Not only did he escape, but he managed to carry off his thievish earnings. Then look how cleverly he behaved in society in never being suspected. Yet he stole—as we learned at the trial of Tait and the rest—at balls, at weddings, from private houses, and blackmailed any number of people. A dangerously clever man, I call him.”

“Well, don’t let us talk any more about him,” said Charvington impatiently. “Maud is clever, if you like, and probably will end in imposing him on some second-rate republic as its president, even though he is a foreigner. I believe that there is no end to that woman’s ambition. But he and she are both out of our lives. Also Hale is dead, and as Lesbia has now changed her name, she will not be connected with the sordid past in any way. Let us talk of something more agreeable.”

“The amethyst cross, for instance,” said Lesbia pointedly.

Charvington wriggled. “Why? That belongs to the disagreeable past.”

“It taught George and me a lesson,” said Lesbia seriously, “and I am sorry that it has been lost sight of.”

“It has not been lost sight of,” said Charvington, after a pause. “Jabez got it from Hale and restored it to me. But I did not show it to you, Lesbia child, because I thought that the sight of it would be painful.”

“Not now that I have learned its lesson. Where is it, father?”

“Call Tim.”

Lesbia rang a silver bell which was on the table, and shortly Tim, looking more grotesque and more like a gnome than ever, appeared. He was with the young couple as the major-domo of their small household and enjoyed himself hugely. “Tim,” ordered Lord Charvington, giving him a key, “go to my study and open my dispatch box. Bring me the morocco case you will find in it—a red morocco case.”

“Yes, yer lardship,” said the major-domo gravely, as he departed.

“Are you sure you want the cross, Lesbia?” asked Mrs. Walker seriously.

"Yes. Whenever I forget to be kind and thoughtful, whenever I am inclined to judge others harshly, the cross will remind me of my own shortcomings."

"You have none, dear," said George fondly.

"George," Mrs. Walker smiled, "you are spoiling her."

"I know someone else who spoils me more," whispered Lesbia, roguishly, and Mrs. Walker smoothed the girl's hair.

At this moment Tim returned with the case. Lord Charvington opened it and took out the ornament which glittered in the rosy hues of sunset.

"Preserve us!" whispered Tim, crossing himself. "The unlucky cross!"

"Lucky now, Tim," said Charvington, slipping a slender watchchain he wore from his waistcoat. "It found me my daughter. Here, Lesbia," he threaded the loop at the top of the cross, "you can wear it now."

Lesbia bent her head and her father threw the chain on her neck. The amethyst cross gleamed with purple fire on her white bosom, a symbol of all that had passed and a symbol also of a brighter future. "I shall always wear it," said Lesbia with serious lovely eyes.

"Refuse and lose," said George meditatively; "well, we have not refused the cross, although I dare say had it been in our powers to do so we should have shirked the burden."

"Thank Heaven you were not allowed to, for the bearing of the burden has taught you much," said Mrs. Walker devoutly.

"It has earned me the crown of perfect love," said George, drawing Lesbia to his breast.

"And that is worth everything," Lesbia replied, kissing him.

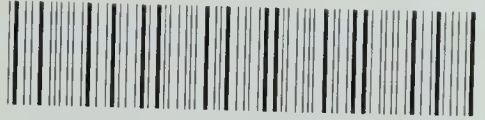


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